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In the summer of 1985, shocked by images of emaciated African kids I had witnessed on television, I bought a one-way ticket for Khartoum, Sudan. On arrival I was hired by the United Nations World Food Program to coordinate humanitarian assistance in Darfur for 50,000 children displaced by a drought of biblical proportions. I was 27 years of age, spoke only a few words of Arabic, and had no experience managing large-scale emergency operations. I spent my first three months scouring the local *souks* for camels to transport supplies to far-flung camps along the Chadian border. My responsibilities included supervising the burial of dozens of dead girls and boys in empty food grain bags marked with the words “A Gift from the People of the United States of America”. The experience in the Darfur camps marked me for life, and my world has never been the same since.

I launched my first project for street children in Khartoum in 1986 after catching a 10 year-old urchin breaking into my military-specification Toyota Land Cruiser with a bent nail. The boy inspired me to open Sudan's first technical training school for kids living rough, and apart from their families, on account of the famine. Pickpockets, petty thieves and housebreakers were transformed into carpenters, welders and electricians; our graduates were hired by local businesses. Over the ensuing years I have worked with bruised and battered children confined to squalid cells in jails and mental institutions, with girls struggling to read and write in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, and with semi-nomadic children living on abandoned oil barges on the White Nile in South Sudan. It's a world apart from oak-paneled corporate boardrooms, and expansive parking lots clogged with late-model SUV's.

Since October 2002 I have been helping young children in Nepal employed in brick kilns, coal mines and carpet factories. Every day is different, and I never have to wear a suit to work. There are many success stories—children who have won access to schools, and who now can dream of starting their own small business, or perhaps becoming a teacher. But there are difficult moments, too. The worst part of my job is losing a child to disease or indifference, or witnessing a child's total despair after having his tools confiscated by the policeman who demands a bribe. I visit jails in Kathmandu and often recognize kids who once were enrolled in our programs. Now all hope is lost. They reach their fingers through the steel bars to make contact, and a few words are exchanged between us. And then I move on.

Guns take a big toll in communities where I work. Recently while in Rio de Janeiro I searched for two children I had befriended more than 15 years ago only to learn that they had died young as victims of gang violence. I was offered the chance to visit the cemetery where they are buried but refrained: I wanted to remember them as beautiful and strong kids, struggling to keep their families together, and spending any spare moments playing in the waves crashing off Ipanema beach, happy and free.

The best part of my work is being associated with truly remarkable children—spontaneous and ingenious and optimistic girls and boys despite their abject poverty. Since I arrived in Kathmandu I have had the honor of teaching a weekly class on global issues to Buddhist children from the Tibetan border region. Ten of the students from my class have won scholarships to study overseas, including six girls now studying at universities and high schools in the US, Canada, Norway and Italy. I keep a card from one of them on my desk in Kathmandu: “I am aware of this golden opportunity and I will try to do my best”, writes Ms. Dawa Dolma, age 17. For children still confined to carpet factories and coal mines, learning to read and write is their only ticket out of poverty. For girls and young women, going to school means they will have some control over their own lives, and some independence from their future husbands.

You can find courage in the most unlikely places—in a refugee camp, a jail cell, or a classroom full of Tibetan kids struggling with their English grammar lessons. I have the extraordinary privilege of being allowed into the world of destitute children, on their own terms. After twenty years along this path, I know there’s no turning back.