

# We Need to Harness Youthful Idealism

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**AMSTERDAM:** Most children I have come to know, whether rich or poor, have a profound longing to do something worthwhile with their lives. They speak to me about their desire to protect Brazil's tropical rain forests or rescue green turtles in Indonesia or help street children in Central America.

What happens over time to this deep-set idealism? Unfortunately, even the most independent young adults usually succumb to relentless messages from peers, family members and the corporate world that earning a big income must be their top priority.

Although I will never become rich designing projects for street children, I have had the good fortune to work alongside people from many countries who have chosen to make a difference rather than to make a great deal of money. Most are passionate about their work and consider themselves lucky to be paid to do something they believe in. They are also among the most compelling people on the planet.

I know Red Cross volunteers who can engineer a solar-heated shower from a length of rubber hose, speak four languages with ease and write poetry in their spare time. Unburdened by the compulsion to earn six-figure incomes, they live day-to-day and travel light. They don't lose sleep worrying that they will never pack a Platinum American Express card. Their children sleep in hammocks and socialize with local kids; instead of Play Stations they have jungle trails to explore.

How do people end up working overseas with human rights or environmental organizations rather than with law firms at home? Most activists tell the same story. At a critical moment in their lives they experienced an epiphany — a sudden and powerful moment of heightened awareness when they understood that another path lay before them. I experienced such a moment in 1984 at an emergency feeding station in the Ogaden Desert of Ethiopia, surrounded by emaciated children barely clinging to life. These children were the toughest kids that I had ever encountered and I vowed never to forget them.

But I have never met anyone who experienced an epiphany hanging out at the water cooler in an air-conditioned office tower. The problem is that so few young people are presented with the option of volunteering in Africa or Asia. The choice is Harvard versus MIT, not the Sierra Club versus Amnesty International.

Undergraduates at America's leading colleges compete to load up their resumé with relevant work experience, such as spending summers slaving for banks and law firms. After graduation the escalator leads to graduate school and then directly to the corporate world. Dreams of sunrises in the Masai Mara are soon replaced with plans for golf on Wednesday afternoons.

I regularly visit international schools in cities as far apart as Rome, Dar es Salaam and Singapore to speak about my work with destitute children. On several occasions I have returned to high schools where years earlier I had met young people who had plans to change the world. What happened to these promising students? Parents, friends and potential employers had intervened. The best of the new generation had accepted high-paying jobs with Pfizer, not the Peace Corps. With Dow Chemical instead of Jane Goodall. With McKinsey rather than Covenant House.

As we approach Global Youth Service Day on Saturday, I hope for their own sake these brilliant young men and women don't think too much about the price they have paid for their affluence. Or the remarkable African street children they could have befriended and profoundly affected. Or the extraordinary international team they could have worked alongside serving as physicians with Médecins Sans Frontières. I hope their new sport utility vehicles are some consolation and that their bosses give them Wednesday afternoons for golf, as promised.

*The writer, founder of Street Kids International, designs projects for street children in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and war-affected children in Sudan and Sierra Leone. He contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.*