

## Voluntourism – Gaining more than you give

Mike Hsieh is a venture capitalist in San Francisco who loves to travel and to involve his family in volunteer work. Given his time constraints at work, he did not think it was possible to combine his two passions. Then one day he came across people and places on the internet and sent Kate Stefanko an email, “would it be possible to design a one-week volunteer project after our African safari trip?” To his surprise the answer came back “Yes.”

“We are blessed as a family with good health, education and career opportunities. At home we had served in soup kitchens and elderly homes and wanted do similar work abroad. I really liked how people and places sought to understand our objectives and then organized a custom project for our family. Kate also put us in touch with their local partners and previous volunteers so that we have a good understanding of the native culture and lifestyle.” says Mike.

Kate matched the Hsieh family with Mapoch village in the Ndebele community just outside Johannesburg, South Africa. Mike and his wife Tonia would help build a pit latrine for the local pre-school. Daughter Karina, age 16, would help the village women design and market their bead work, and son Mason, age 14, would take a census of the village.

“It turned out to be one of our best experiences,” Mike added. “In addition to making a difference, our family actually came home richer in personal and global perspectives.”

“I had asked to help build something of concrete value with my hands. Kate therefore assigned Tonia and me to build a latrine. Suffice it to say that I have no carpentry or building experience so I worked as a laborer for two young local builders. This basically entailed loading, cleaning and laying bricks under the hot sun. Despite my best efforts, it became quite clear that I often got in the way of these two professionals because they had to double-check my work. One day I made a comment to the local pastor that everyone may have been better off if I had stayed at home and just sent some money instead.”

“Pastor Peter smiled at me and said, ‘if you had stayed home, you would not see how important this project is to our village. You would have deprived the people here of seeing that you came all the way from America to help, and you and I would not have become friends.’

“His profound comment opened my eyes to the real importance of becoming personally involved in a community of people working towards a common cause. You reinforce each other’s commitments and the resultant relationships can last a lifetime.”

Through their discussions with Pastor Peter and another volunteer, Nigel Pegler, the Hsiehs became aware of a bicycle project that the two had been working on. For some reason few people had bicycles in South Africa. Pastor Peter and Nigel had been working on importing a container of bicycles to the village and needed funds for the container shipment. Hoping that this mode of transportation could

significantly improve their standard of living, Mike and Tonia decided to make a contribution to finance the shipping cost which would bring approximately 350 bicycles to the Mapoch village.

“I have spoken with Pastor Peter on several occasions since our return to the U.S. Even though we were only there for a short time our family feels a close connection to Mapoch and all the wonderful people there,” says Mike, “as a matter of fact, we are thinking of returning next summer because we have made some meaningful friendships and gained a lot more than we gave.”



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