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Soul practitioners

By Paul McLaughlin

Illustration: Corey Mihailiuk

In an effort to give back, many Canadian accountants are committing their time and labour to relief efforts around the world

In the late afternoon of a muggy April day in New Orleans, Ian Clarke and four other Canadians returned to their hotel in the French Quarter. They had just come back from helping build a new home in the city's Upper Ninth Ward, which had been devastated by the flooding caused in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in late August 2005. Dressed in shorts, work boots and a Habitat for Humanity T-shirt, they were easily recognizable among the many volunteers who come to the Big Easy to contribute time, money and hard labour to the beleaguered city.



Two years going, Ian Clarke has brought volunteers to the Big Easy to help in the city's recovery efforts

As they entered the elevator so too did a hotel worker. "He looked at us and said, 'Thank you so very much. You guys are great.' And he shook each of our hands," says 47-year-old Clarke, executive vice-president and CFO, business development for Maple Leafs Sports & Entertainment in Toronto. "That was a great moment for me because it confirmed that what we were doing there was appreciated by the local people."

It was the second year Clarke had brought Canadian volunteers to Louisiana. The idea came to him on January 13, 2007 while watching a National Football League playoff game between the Philadelphia Eagles and the New Orleans Saints on TV. The coverage included a report on the city's slow-moving recovery efforts in the wake of the disaster that had destroyed approximately 284,000 homes. Touched by what he saw, Clarke phoned a buddy at Air Canada Jets and asked, "If I get a few people, can you give us a deal on a plane and help us go down?"

Although MLSE supported his vision, Clarke took on the project as a personal initiative. A few months later, he raised \$68,000 in donations and inspired 31 friends and colleagues to spend three days hammering nails, painting walls and landscaping in a housing project known as the Musicians' Village. The village was a joint effort between musicians Harry Connick Jr. and Branford Marsalis and Habitat for Humanity to provide housing for New Orleans musicians (such as legendary drummer Bob French and guitarist Little Freddie King) and others who lost their homes in the deluge that engulfed 80% of the city. "It was an amazing, enriching experience," says Clarke, who was urged by the participants to do it again.

He accepted that responsibility and on April 29 he roamed up and down the spacious aisles of the Airbus, chatting good-naturedly with a contingent of volunteers that now numbered 53, ranging in age from early 20s to late 50s (Clarke had also raised \$73,000, mainly from the same donors as last year). Some were well heeled while others made the trip thanks to financial assistance from Clarke and others.

While a private jet to New Orleans was an appetizing perk, the group's purpose was to roll up their office sleeves and work. The next morning a bus picked everyone up at the hotel at 7 a.m. The reality of the task at hand soon hit home as the bus passed a community of more than 200 tents set up underneath the I-10 overpass, a few minutes' drive from Bourbon Street. "That's heartbreaking," one of the volunteers said as a young child peered out from one of the flaps. It became even more upsetting on a tour of the Lower Ninth Ward, the hardest hit section of the city. What once had been a thriving, clustered neighbourhood was now a vast open field, with stark cement foundations the only reminders of the small houses that had been plucked off their cinder block foundations and swept away when the nearby levy was breached.

The day's destination was the nearby Upper Ninth, a poor district that suffered flooding that rose to the top of hydro poles. Following a brief orientation, the group was given its assignment: build the inner and outer walls for two new 1,100-sq.-ft. single-family homes with three bedrooms. A very small, complex blueprint seemed unintelligible to almost all the volunteers, who suddenly seemed like office workers out of water. How was this going to be accomplished, especially as two Canadian-based Habitat for Humanity Canada workers, Terry Petkau, director of building services, and Rick Tait, program director, Global Village Programme, were busy with other groups of volunteers?

The volunteers were divided into two groups, with Clarke's crew assigned to 3115 Law St. A foundation resting on cinder blocks had been constructed by previous volunteers on the long, narrow lot, about 30 ft. wide by 100 ft. deep. The house was a "donate build," which meant the registered land owner had applied for a Habitat home, qualified by meeting certain criteria, then donated the property to Habitat under an agreement to build a home on the land and sell it back to the owner at zero-interest financing. "The house will be worth about US\$105,000 to US\$110,000 when finished," Jim Pate, executive director of New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity, tells the crew, "but we'll sell it to the owner for US\$85,000. This homeowner, when the smoke clears, will pay a monthly note — principal, no interest, real estate taxes, home ownership insurance, flood insurance, and an annual termite contract — of roughly US\$650 a month." Considering the average rent for an ordinary three-bedroom apartment in New Orleans is US\$1,271, "they will be paying about half that to own their own home," says Pate.

It is an inspiring message — but one that brings a humbling reality to the forefront. This is a real home that needs properly constructed walls. "I have no skills. I'm an accountant, not a tradesperson," says 47-year-old Rod Ancrum, a childhood friend of Clarke who has worked most of his career in financial management at the Royal Bank of Canada. "My hands are very soft."



Canadian volunteers abroad: Alberta's Wayne Kauffman, left, has been involved in projects such as the construction of a water reservoir in Ecuador (below left). Clarke, Rod Ancrum and volunteers, top right, prepare for the construction of house walls in New Orleans. Bottom right: Zomba, Malawi, where Halifax's Tara Timms (below) conducted a one-week field audit on international humanitarian group Dignitas International's accounting system



The worst part of Wayne Kauffman's excursion to Ecuador in January 2007 was eating guinea pig — he managed only one bite of the local delicacy that is prepared on special occasions. "They tell me it tastes like chicken," says the 62-year-old FCA and associate executive director of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Alberta. "I couldn't get past the thought it was a guinea pig. At least they gave me the back end. The front still had the head on it."

The best part came when he and his wife, Vivien Wulff, were back in Edmonton — pictures of the grand opening of a clean water pipeline that Edmonton's Riverview Rotarians, of which Kauffman has been a long-time member, and others had helped fund and construct for the remote agricultural Verde-Guno community in southcentral Ecuador.

"There was clean water flowing out of a spigot, that was such a memory," Kauffman says. "In Canada we complain about things like snow in April. But we can go to a tap and drink the water and not have to worry that we end up with worms or a distended stomach or getting sick. Well, now that small community [about 80 families] can say the same."

Readers of CAMagazine first encountered Kauffman and Wulff in a story ("CAs who care," November 2003) about how the couple were part of a team of 32 Canadian volunteers who went to Ecuador to provide medical and dental care. The trip in January was their third to the South American country, with the pipeline project being the reason for the two-week visit, although Wulff also worked with Canadian dentists on the trip.

“We had heard stories of children getting sick from drinking yucky water,” says Kauffman, who helped raise about \$70,000 from various Rotary clubs in Canada and Ecuador and Alberta’s Wild Rose Foundation. The money was used to dig a trench about 91 centimeters deep in which was laid a polyvinyl chloride pipe from the small village of Sigsig to a chlorination plant some 4.2 km and an 800-ft. drop away. “The villagers really took ownership of the project,” he says. “They took part in helping dig the trench. You’d see the moms and dads digging away with a pick axe and shovel, a baby strapped on the back, the other children playing nearby.”

Because the community is 10,500 ft. above sea level, Kauffman was advised not to take part in the physical labour for fear of altitude sickness. However, he did take a one-day trip on horseback to see how the work was progressing.

While Kauffman was monitoring the pipeline project, Wulff was receiving a crash course on becoming a dental assistant. One case in particular gladdened the couple’s hearts. A girl of about 16 never smiled because of the terrible condition of her teeth. “You can imagine what that would do to a teenage girl’s self esteem,” says Kauffman. Before they left, it had been fixed so well “that she smiled incessantly. It was a beautiful sight to behold.”

Although 33-year-old Tara Timms went to Malawi to volunteer her accounting skills to Dignitas International, a humanitarian organization, the Halifax native and director of finance, administration and information technology for the Halifax 2011 Canada Games, was moved more by a nonfinancial set of numbers — the number of people in the southeastern African country with HIV/AIDS. One of the poorest countries in the world, almost one million people, out of a population of 12.8 million, were living with HIV at the end of 2005, according to a United Nations report. The leading cause of death among adults, AIDS has already claimed 640,000 victims in Malawi since 1985 and is a major factor in the country’s appallingly low life expectancy of 43 years.

“One of the local myths involves something called ‘magic sex,’” Timms says. “There’s a belief that you can’t contract AIDS during this kind of sex. We asked a lot of people what it meant but we never got a clear definition.” Another custom was equally disturbing. In one ethnic group, when a married couple is expecting a child, it is acceptable for the man to go outside the marriage for sex in the months leading up to the woman giving birth and until she is ready to resume sexual relationships. “The problem is the man often contracts AIDS during this time and brings it back into the marriage,” she says.

One afternoon, a Dignitas worker spoke to a group of Malawians about the risks of such customs. “A chief was there,” says Timms, “and after the talk he said it’s time we listened to the direction of these people. We need to change our customs.”

Timms was based in Zomba, a municipality of 100,000 in the south, to conduct a one-week field audit on Dignitas’ accounting system, which was run by Rosa, an accountant from Zimbabwe. “[Dignitas] didn’t like to have local people head the accounting department because of the potential for corruption,” Timms says. She was impressed with Rosa’s work and found no cause for concern, although she made certain recommendations for improvement. “A lot of the necessary controls were in place,” she says. “I told Dignitas that overall the books were in good shape as long as Rosa was there. But if she leaves, it would have to replace her with someone as competent as she is.”

Although the poverty and bleakness of the AIDS epidemic made deep impressions on her, Timms left Africa with a powerful sense of having given something of value, something of herself to others. “I definitely want to come back to Africa,” she says.

Timms acquired a passion for volunteer work when she was eight or 10 years old from her mother. “She’s the type of person who if she has \$10 and her necessities are met with \$5, she’ll give the other five away, no matter how much we were struggling,” says Timms. “I have this vivid memory of walking into a house in Halifax to deliver Christmas presents to this family we had adopted. There were no lights on. We walked into the kitchen and the entire family was sitting on the kitchen floor wrapped in blankets with the stove on and its door open and that’s how they were heating themselves.” Perhaps such moments shaped her commitment to helping others.

Timms has lived up to that commitment to such a degree that she was named the 2007 Ross L. Towler CA of the Year by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nova Scotia for her community activism. The award came primarily as a result of her work as the treasurer for Alice Housing, a Halifax shelter that provides reasonable accommodation for women and children fleeing domestic violence. Her accounting skills were particularly important at Alice Housing to help put in place solid control processes.

By the second day on the Law Street site in New Orleans, the once confused and nervous volunteers have become hard working and productive. One reason for the success is volunteer George Giotis, an electrician who was able to decipher the plans for building the walls.

Despite a scarcity of tools and equipment — the group had to make its own cutting table and two saw horses — wall sections soon begin to take shape. Clarke commandeers a chop saw and along with Ancrum and others churns out a nonstop flow of 8-ft. studs, all requiring precise notches to be cut into several parts of the wood. It is one of the toughest jobs, as he inhales sawdust and absorbs the saw's vibrations in his hands during a long, backbreaking day. The temperature is in the mid-80s, and the work is physically taxing, but the mood is upbeat and cooperative.

When lunch arrives, so too does Marguerite Doyle-Johnston, a gregarious third-generation resident of the Ninth Ward. A widow, she lost her home during the flooding, her consulting business failed soon after and the following January, her 24-year-old son was shot dead in the Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer she now lives in. Despite having recovered nothing but two flute glasses and a muddied old US flag that had belonged to her father, she pays for a crawfish lunch for all the volunteers (several hundred each day) on their first day of duty. A self-described God-loving woman, she puts on the spread "because it took your money, your time to come here and help us rebuild our neighborhood. That's the least we can do for you."

It is obvious many people, unused to the physical labour, are finding it hard to return to work following the lunch break. Clarke reads the situation and jumps up on the house foundation. "Repeat after me a line from Die Hard," he says, selecting a stick-it-in-your-face phrase uttered by Bruce Willis' character John McClane to the evil Hans Gruber. "Yippie-kay-yay, mother-**!##!" he yells, a large grin on his face. Everyone yells it back and picks up their tools, the mood suddenly brighter.

On the last day, the group works so efficiently it ends early, all the walls finished and, remarkably, expertly made. Across town, at a prayer luncheon downtown, Mayor Ray Nagin is asked whether the city still needs volunteers to help. "We definitely need volunteers," says Nagin, adding he is eternally grateful to all the Canadians who come. "We probably will need two more years before we really firmly stabilize everything and the full cycle will be at least 10 years."

Considering that grim prognosis, Clarke is asked on the plane ride home if he plans to do it again in 2009. Exhausted and suffering from laryngitis, he begs off answering. A few days later, however, he indicates he most likely will do it again.

Why? "Because as Pate said, this is a marathon, not a sprint," he says. Also, because so many told him they wanted to return. "To a person, they all said they were better as a person after having done it."

It is a theme reiterated by Kauffman and Timms. "So much needs to be done in this world," says Kauffman, "but if you take it one step at a time, one group at a time, one family at a time, things will get better." Then he mentions an 18-month-old girl in Ecuador who has a hole in her heart and needs an operation her family cannot afford. It will only cost a few thousand dollars and he has commitments for more than half the money already. "This kind of work, it's good for your soul," he says. Timms agrees, saying she would encourage CAs to volunteer. "Very often it's on your to-do list but you just don't get around to it," she says. But, she would advise, "just go do it because the community benefits so much and you do too."

Inspired by his experiences in New Orleans, Clarke wants to do more in the years ahead, especially in Africa, which has long had a powerful attraction for him. Volunteer work "refocuses and repurposes and recalibrates your life," he says. "You try to do your little bit to help, to make a difference. That's what it's all about."

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