



CHILD'S DREAM

How does one define a life lived well? If you did a straw poll in a crowd of people, you would probably get a diverse range of answers.

BY AISHA BINTE ABDUL RAHMAN

WHO WE ARE

People at different stages of their lives understandably want different things. But yet despite our seeming individuality, if you were to look past the details in someone's answer and stared hard at its essence, we all essentially define a life well-lived as one that is resplendent with fulfillment and ultimately makes us feel complete.

Marc Jenni, 41, a Swiss banker with UBS for 19 years was living a comfortable life but yet he felt like his life was missing something. He was happy, but did not feel fully, truly happy. So in 2003, he left the banking industry to take a sabbatical and traveled to Thailand to join 33-year-old Daniel Siegfried, who had also just left UBS after 10 years of service and was volunteering at an organization there. After realizing that the organization he was volunteering at had a lot going wrong with it, Siegfried suggested and discussed with Jenni about

founding and running a not-for-profit organization of their own. Jenni agreed and had intended to help Siegfried set up the non-profit organization in terms of its organizational and legal structure before he went his separate way.

Soon after in 2003, Child's Dream Association (based in Switzerland, registered as a Swiss charity) was established and in 2005 its local entity, Child's Dream Foundation Thailand (registered as a Thai charity) was born.

Jenni never went his separate way. Drawing on their individual strengths, Siegfried is responsible for the project aspect of the organization and Jenni remains the co-founder of Child's Dream and head of finance and administration, and is responsible for the legal, marketing, fundraising and administration aspects of the organization. And he has no intention of leaving either.

When you read about the mission and the impactful development work that the young organization has achieved so far, both in immediate and gradual terms, it is not difficult to understand why Jenni is still where he is today.

According to its website, Child's Dream is a not-for-profit charity that is dedicated to empowering marginalized children and youth in the Mekong sub-region, which includes Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. With a focus on improving the young's access to education and healthcare, as well as providing socioeconomic opportunities for families, the charity works in close partnership with communities towards building a better future.

It began with the project 'Child Life' in Chiang Rai province, Thailand. Funded by private donors, the inaugural project involved building a water system for a children's shelter for about 120 Burmese street children who live along the Thai-Burmese border. These children were often begging for food or money and used to transport drugs across the border into Thailand. Like how the organization was started, the embarkation of Child's Dream on its first project was equally organic and serendipitous.

Jenni related, "Daniel found the project by driving around in his motorcycle at the very beginning and we got to know a young girl, 'Tai' who was 24 at that time. A Thai volunteer, she introduced us to the project and convinced us to provide a water system for the children's shelter. Tai quickly



Marc Jenni participating at a Buddhist ceremony during a school opening in Laos in December 2009.

“The major challenge for Daniel and myself was we had to choose the water system and it’s not so easy to go and buy a water system when you have a degree in finance or if you’re a chartered financial analyst.”

became the first staff of Child’s Dream and continues to work for us after seven years as the focus group head for basic education”.

Since its humble beginnings, Child’s Dream and its sister organization, diversethics Foundation, have successfully carried out a wide range of projects including one that protects 40,000 Burmese from malaria through a comprehensive program that provides mosquito nets, treatment and education.

However, the project that has personally touched Jenni the most is the Children’s Medical Fund, a project that has a budget of US\$350,000 a year and provides life-saving operations to Burmese children. If they survive the transportation from Burma to Thai soil, they often end up at an illegal clinic that has no medical facilities and is unable to carry out operations for many illnesses such as congenital heart disease. Child’s Dream organizes transportation for these undocumented children to Chiang Mai University Hospital where 150 to 200 children are able to receive much needed operations a year. “It is a project that is close to my heart because it is something that immediately saves children’s lives,” Jenni shared.

Most notably too, it has also made a substantial impact on the Thai education system through the success of its biggest project to date – the building of the Burmese Migrant School – the biggest migrant school in Mae Sot. With a price tag of close to US\$1 million, the ambitious project took one-and-a-half years to complete but was a complete success. With 32 classrooms for 1,200 students, the school along the Thai-Burmese border caters to both documented and undocumented Burmese migrant children. Jenni explained, “This building prompted so many changes in the Thai education system. The Thai Government started to accept migrant schools and started to provide financial help to migrant schools. Policies were rewritten and the Government began combining smaller migrant schools into bigger learning centers, drawing from the example of the Burmese Migrant School, resulting in a higher quality of learning.”

What have been some challenges and solutions?

In its journey to achieve such success in its projects, the founders of Child’s Dream inevitably

encountered challenges.

When they first started the organization in Thailand for example, working in a country whose language you did not know was a major obstacle for both Jenni and Siegfried. But they knew that it was an obstacle that they had to overcome. And fast. As Jenni explained, “Immediately after we got here, we realized that the key issue to everything is to understand the language and to be able to communicate on a basic level with the local people. We both took Thai lessons quite immediately after our arrival. We went to school every morning from 8am to 10am for six months. Then we did another two hours of homework and started work only in the afternoon until at night.”

It is this perseverance and heart of its founders that has seen Child’s Dream through its many challenges. For example in ‘Child Life’, the organization’s first project, the two founders were faced with a task that was completely out of their area of expertise – choosing a water system for the children’s shelter. As Jenni recounted, “The major challenge for Daniel and myself was we had to choose the water system and it’s not so easy to go and buy a water system when you



A class of happy primary kids in Laos.

have a degree in finance or if you're a chartered financial analyst." But they persevered and sought the assistance and advice of a company that specialized in providing water treatment systems. Eight years later, the system is still up and running.

It is this personal motivation and not the previous industrial experience of the person per se that matters according to Jenni. In fact, it is due to his previous

financial background that has strengthened the financial and administration foundation of the organization, allowing it to focus on delivering on its many projects across the four countries.

CORPORATE SKILLS IN A NOT-FOR-PROFIT SETTING

Personally, in his current portfolio, Jenni found that his reporting skills

honed through the many years as a private banker were crucial in maintaining donor relationships and forming new ones. It has given intermediaries the assurance to do a one-to-one forwarding of project proposal and reports to prospective and current donors, improving the efficiency of the process.

His skill of maintaining close personal relationships with donors can also be attributed to his many

years as a private banker with UBS. According to Jenni, maintaining a good personal relationship with your donors is important in donor relationship management. He explained, "We have one-to-one relationships with both our bigger and medium donors. I know 60 percent of our donors on a personal level. We really try to be close to them and I think this is really something which donors also like. With our small size, it's still possible for Daniel, Manuela Bianchi (chief operation officer of Child's Dream) and I to take care of a lot of donors in a one-to-one relationship."

Can you share five lessons learned/advice for other NPOs?

- 1** While a not-for-profit organization is not a business, its administration and financial aspect has to be as efficient as one.
- 2** Listen, listen, listen to the communities and spend more time with the community to deeply understand their needs. It takes more time but it makes developmental aid successful.
- 3** Never impose anything on a community. Do not forget that you are dealing with people who actually know what to do but they lack the financial means to do so.
- 4** Keep it simple. Many people enter the development and philanthropic world with many



Daniel Siegfried handing over school materials during an opening in Laos in September 2010.

ideas and end up coming up with projects or programs that are totally over-engineered and difficult for communities to carry out. It is the simple things the communities tell you; it is the simple things they understand; and it is the simple things that work.

- 5** Due diligence. We have quite a thorough due diligence process where we analyze all the different stakeholders and compare the projects against each other and price-wise before a project is evaluated. The Project Evaluation Committee convenes on a monthly basis, so the turnaround time from scoping a project to

implementation can be as short as one to two months.

Can you share a beneficiary's story?

Jenni shared, "About five years ago, we offered an internship opportunity to a Chiang Rai University graduating student, Ayu Chuepa. He was from the Akha Minority Hill Tribe, the poorest and most neglected group of Thailand's eight recognized minorities. The first from his village to go to university, his community had pooled all their money they had to fund his education.



Jenni hands over sports materials during an opening in Laos in January 2009.

Chuepa interned with us for three months and we made him a job offer after he completed his Bachelor's Degree with outstanding results. He became our project manager for north Thailand and a valuable team member of Child's Dream. He opened his Akha community to us and we built schools and boarding houses for the village under his guidance. He essentially was able to give back to his community only after two years of graduating.

Now the village is very strong in Arabica coffee production but they never had an idea of how to market and sell it, having been cheated before. Chuepa eventually applied for the Social Entrepreneurship Grant awarded by Child's Dream. The idea is the grantee will use the funds to create an ongoing program with positive social benefit and empower them to create and operate an enterprise of their own design. We were stuck

in the middle because giving him the grant as it meant that he would resign and leave the organization. But his proposal was so outstanding that he was awarded a grant of US\$18,000 to establish his own social coffee business, Akha Ama Coffee (www.akhaama.com).

This is for me a real success story. He had a huge impact on his community while he was working with us and now even more so."

What's next for the organization?

In the next 12 to 24 months, Child's Dream intends to increase its project implementation capacity in Laos and Cambodia, increasing the rate with which it builds schools there. It aims to increase the speed of project implementation from 10 schools a year in Laos to 15, and from three to four schools a year in Cambodia to six to seven.

It also intends to continue adding supplementary programs to its schools, like providing playgrounds to providing early childhood education opportunities, water systems and school health programs, thereby supplementing the existing infrastructure that they have built.

Jenni explained, "We normally enter a community after our due diligence process. We provide them with an infrastructure and then we test the community for two to three years. If it is a success, we provide them with additional services. It is a way of keeping them encouraged and connected to us." 

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www.childsdream.org