

SUSTAINING AFRICA

For lawyer brothers John and Steve O'Reilly, a commitment to helping orphans in Africa has evolved into an innovative sustainability project with the potential to change the way poor communities survive and thrive.

CLAIRE CHAFFEY visits Tanzania to find out just how it works.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLAIRE CHAFFEY AND MARYTZA LEIVA



Sitting on a bus on the island of Zanzibar off the coast of Tanzania in 2006, Australian lawyer John O'Reilly had no idea his life was about to change. En route to volunteer at an Australian-run charity in the bustling city of Arusha, John – a principal at O'Reilly Sever & Co in the tiny NSW town of Hastings Point – met a couple from Cairns who would change his destination and his destiny.

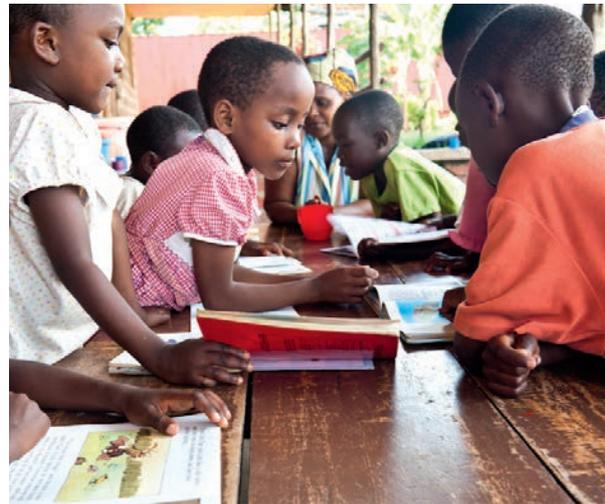
The couple had been in the jacaranda-lined town of Moshi, at the foot of Africa's highest peak, Mount Kilimanjaro, doing some construction work in an orphanage. Unfortunately, they were unable to finish what they had started and they asked John if he would pick up where they left off. Not afraid of a challenge, John agreed and abandoned his trip to Arusha. He soon found himself building the orphanage's kitchen.

Not long afterwards, however, it became apparent that the orphanage was being used as a money-making front for some insalubrious locals and John decided to cut ties. He was, however, completely and utterly determined to assist orphans in the area.

"My introduction to the plight of the orphaned kids was overwhelming," John recalls. "I returned home and immediately began creating a charity in Australia with my family and friends. A couple of years later, in 2008, we registered a charity in Tanzania."



Top: Manager Sarah Thomas, John O'Reilly and Greg Knibbs (right) meet with the Director/Principal of the Horticultural College of Arusha. Bottom: Steve (left) and John (right) with some of the Kili Kids.



The charity is Communities Assist (formerly known as Committee Assist) and one of its primary roles is to support an orphanage through a community development program based on sustainability. The orphanage is Kili Kids and it sits on a two-hectare block known as Rainbow Ridge.

In the shadow of Kilimanjaro, Kili Kids is home to 26 boys and girls aged three to 17, all of whom are either orphans or have been removed from their homes by social services due to neglect, abuse or malnutrition. The children are cared for by a team of local staff members – known as “mamas” – and a small on-the-ground management team. Some of the kids are eventually reunited with their families.

When John established Kili Kids, Rainbow Ridge was nothing but a plot of dry, barren land near the village of Maili Sita, on the outskirts of Moshi. Today, after many years of building, cultivating and cutting of red tape, it is a happy, cosy home with separate sleeping blocks for boys and girls, an administration centre, basic cooking facilities and thriving gardens filled with vegetables, fruit trees and

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STEVE O'REILLY

various animal enclosures for cows, goats, chickens and fish.

Each day at Kili Kids sees the same routine: the children rise at 6.30am, wash, dress, and have breakfast. At 7am, they set off across the fields for the local village school, which is a 30-minute walk away. When they return from school, they have a juice while they wait for dinner, with the smaller ones having a nap and the older children playing soccer or reading books. Then it's time for homework and chores.

“We teach them how to look after themselves because they won't be living here for the rest of their lives,” says head mama Greta.

Dinner is at 6.30pm sharp, after which time they sit with the mamas for singing, dancing and storytelling. Bedtime is 8pm.

It's a well-rehearsed routine that creates a sense of stability and community, but this is no ordinary orphanage.





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JOHN O’REILLY

While wanting to ensure the best care was available for the children, John and the Communities

Assist team developed a unique vision for a self-sustaining model that would ensure a constant supply of fresh food at Rainbow Ridge. “I have always recognised that the future for subsistence farmers and the road to sustainability is their ability to maximise production of their own land so they can better sustain themselves and their families,” says John.

“Although my initial intention was to assist orphans, I knew that assistance based on handouts was not sustainable. We had to design a better model.”

That “better model” crystallised when John was introduced to Greg Knibbs, a leading permaculture expert based in Western Australia.

“Greg introduced me to permaculture, and I believed it was the perfect solution for

poor communities in Africa – designing their farming plots and homes into fully sustainable living environments,” says John.

“Permaculture is a design science that seeks to incorporate the many diverse elements of nature – including human beings – in any living system so that each element harmoniously interacts with the others. Put simply, the idea is to place the elements of the system in such a way that they cooperatively provide maximum benefit to the other elements around them. The simplicity of the principles really appealed to me – the idea of replicating nature at its best through the cooperation of all elements.

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It is Rainbow Ridge’s focus on permaculture that sets it apart from other like organisations, and the children are actively encouraged to enjoy their surrounds and take pleasure in cultivating their own food. And while there is still much work to be done at Rainbow Ridge, the results – and the fact that much of what ends up on the kids’ plates is home grown – speak for themselves.

But it hasn’t been an easy road, and getting Communities Assist to a point where it is a registered charity in both Australia and Tanzania has been a fraught process peppered with bureaucratic stumbles. Other challenges, says John, came with the trial and error associated with creating the right permaculture model for Tanzania’s harsh environment, as well as getting the local community on board with the project.

“Initially, finding trustworthy locals to partner with us in assisting their community was difficult,” Johns says. “Orphanages in the third world are sometimes created as covers to make money by unscrupulous individuals, where the ultimate objective is to raise money for themselves and not properly care

for the children. The children are just pawns to achieve that objective. Getting to know and gain the acceptance of the local community and authorities has taken time.

“Devising sustainable fundraising programs in Australia and elsewhere is always a challenge, and not having tax deductibility status for a long period made that particularly difficult. I can say from experience that gaining tax deductibility status in Australia is harder than running a complex High Court case.”

But that status has now been achieved, and the Communities Assist team is looking towards the next steps for the organisation, which include gaining sponsors for the children and expanding the teaching and training of local community members in the benefits of permaculture – under the guidance of Greg Knibbs – using Rainbow Ridge as a demonstration site.

“The next step is to ‘green out’ the surrounding community,” says John. “We know this can only be achieved through successful demonstration.

“Over the next year, we intend to finesse the great work we have already done to the bare land that was Rainbow Ridge and build a Sustainability Education Centre using our

shipped-in 40ft containers as the framework for this building.

“By teaching, working and collaborating with our local community, we know we can assist them to not only improve their own economies and welfare to care for their own children, but also the other local orphaned kids that fall through the gaps.

“We have all sorts of sponsorship, donation and volunteer opportunities for corporates – including law firms – and their staff to get involved in. I would love to see a contingent of Aussie lawyers getting together to build our Sustainability Education Centre and get it up and running locally so Rainbow Ridge operates as a true teaching demonstration site in sustainability that can be replicated elsewhere.”

One of the law firms already involved in Communities Assist is Clayton Utz, the firm where John’s brother, Steve, is a partner in the Melbourne office. Steve has been involved in the project from the beginning, when John returned from Tanzania in 2006 and told him of his plans to establish an orphanage.



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Introducing
the residents
of Kili Kids at
Rainbow Ridge
in Tanzania

KILI  **KIDS**

RAINBOW RIDGE ECO VILLAGE

Visit communitiesassist.org to
learn more about them.

“I was deeply moved by John’s story and was very keen to be involved, but I realised early on that my role was to harness my brother’s enthusiasm and make sure the building blocks were right,” Steve says. “I automatically shifted into that mode as lawyers are trained for: analysing what might be involved in raising funds in Australia to support a program in Africa.

“I approached Clayton Utz and the reaction was swift and positive. I had corporate and tax advice very quickly. We set the Australian structure up properly from the start. Clayton Utz has provided ongoing legal advice and other support since 2006.”

Steve is a firm believer that lawyers and law firms are well equipped to establish and support such projects, and even sees it as somewhat of a duty.

“It is a privilege to be a lawyer, not a right,” he says. “We swear an oath. Integrity is our core value. We should not take our position for granted. The community has every right to expect us to be leaders, and leaders lead by example. Helping others is what it means to be a service provider.

“From a business perspective, projects such as this are capable of generating high levels of engagement across a whole business.

It connects all staff – not just lawyers from different practice areas, but everybody in the office. Compassion and a willingness to help others is not a value that is taught at law school, but it is one that can be acquired through the school of life.”

John and Steve plan to return to Tanzania this year – as they do frequently – and it is these trips to Kili Kids that make all the hard work, stress and red tape worthwhile.

“Without a doubt, the happiness and growth of the children is a highlight and a major driver for me,” John explains. “We have some wonderful stories that evidence how we are getting it right. A big motivator is also recognition that the demonstration site of sustainability that we are developing will not only sustain Kili Kids and other local orphaned kids, but can potentially be replicated anywhere. As Steve says, ‘If we can do it there, we can do it anywhere.’” **LSJ**

WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

The Communities Assist team would love to hear from you. Visit communitiesassist.org for contact details and more information on how you and your firm can get involved.



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