WALK IN THEIR SHOES

Can One Person Change the World?

JIM ZIOLKOWSKI, founder of buildOn

with JAMES S. HIRSCH

SIMON & SCHUSTER

New York  London  Toronto  Sydney  New Delhi
When I was twenty-four, I entered GE’s Financial Management Program, a fast-track position that all but guaranteed a lucrative career in corporate finance. GE liked to hire ambitious young graduates, work them hard, then reward them with the perks and prestige that befit a corporate behemoth. My parents were proud. But fifteen months later I quit. I’m not the first person to have walked out on the GE program; its rigorous demands have caused others to reconsider their career goals. But I doubt many have quit to pursue a mission as improbable as the one I envisioned. I had traveled abroad to developing countries after college, and what I saw had lit a fire within me that I couldn’t put out. In visiting India, Thailand, and Nepal, I had seen cities and villages mired in extreme poverty. When I was in New Delhi, I saw the beggars and the street children, destitute and hungry, without any hope for a better life. When I was in a village in Nepal, I saw families living in mud huts without running water or electricity. The more I traveled in regions of poverty, the more clearly I saw that those conditions were directly related to rampant illiteracy and the general lack of education. But I also saw that these communities desperately wanted their own children to read and write. If I could help in that regard, I was certain their commitment to this cause would surpass my own.

My experiences in developing countries made me more sensitive
to the poverty in my own country, particularly affecting urban youth. The problems of our inner cities are intimidating, and many adults had given up, but I had a different idea: that the kids themselves wanted to build a better a community, shape their own destiny, and disprove the cynics. They wanted to be part of the solution. I didn’t have direct proof initially but was convinced that all kids, regardless of class or circumstance, have the same dreams. The troubled kids, most of them anyway, just need a little guidance from people who believe in them.

I knew there was no silver bullet to cure our social ills, but I was also starting to consider more earnestly what it meant to live my faith as a Roman Catholic. Christ had served the poor and the hungry, and I saw that as our responsibility as well. Over time, I would integrate ideas from other traditions, but the Christian tenets of service to others and social justice motivated me from the start.

I left GE to start a nonprofit organization that offered afterschool programs for high school students in America’s most impoverished inner cities. Enrichment programs, which typically involve academic clubs or the arts, abound in affluent schools but are rare in poor ones. I wanted to offer a different kind of program to engage students in community service so they would be distributors of goodwill instead of only recipients. I wanted them to visit senior centers, help the disabled, clean up parks and abandoned lots, and work at the very food pantries on which some of their own families depended. And perhaps most audaciously, I wanted these same students to help us build schools in the world’s poorest countries so children there would receive long-overdue educational opportunities. This seemed like a natural fit. What better way to give hope to American kids than by having them renew the lives of people in their own neighborhoods while also uplifting children in other parts of the world?

It was quite a plan, but when I left GE Capital, the CFO thought that I’d be back in six months. After all, I had no background in education, no background in youth development programs, and no background in construction. I had never worked as a fundraiser, nor
Prologue

had I ever managed anyone or anything. I had a business degree, a passport, and a few thousand dollars in the bank. My younger brother Dave, who had even less experience than I, would be my partner. Was our dream a long shot? Of course. But I believed in the cause, in the power of service to redeem and transform, and that was all I needed. That’s all anyone needs.

Twenty-two years later, I have journeyed though deprivation and despair. My resolve has been tested, and I have reached to find new strength in my faith. Hostile soldiers in South Africa have aimed their rifles at me while I documented the injustices of apartheid. I’ve been arrested at gun point in Harlem for stealing my own car. I’ve been stung by a scorpion in Brazil and was nearly poisoned by deadly snakes in Africa and South America. I’ve had dysentery on four continents. Malaria almost killed me in Malawi.

But this story is also about hope and redemption. I’ve drawn great strength from the most disadvantaged and courageous among us. I have roamed with street children through the shantytown favelas of Brazil, danced with campesinos in Nicaragua, and listened to all-night drumming vigils for the dead in Malawi. I’ve worked in African communities where more than a third of the population was HIV-positive, tried to comfort American students whose families were on the losing side of the drug war, and watched my own son battle for his life against a rare and unpredictable disease. I’ve been inspired by teachers in the Bronx and humbled by former slaves in Nepal. I interviewed Mother Teresa just before she passed away and the Dalai Lama in his home in Dharamsala. This story is not only mine; it’s the story of the thousands of people who have let me into their communities and into their lives. It’s the story of buildOn, an organization that has confounded expectations and continues to grow, and it’s the story of my son’s bravery to defy all odds. I hope it causes you to laugh, cry, cringe, and think—not about whether one person or even a few can save the world but about how each of us can step forward, step up, and change it.

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About the Authors

After college, Jim Ziolkowski backpacked and hitchhiked around the world, seeking adventure. What he found instead was a village celebrating the opening of its first school, and it changed his life. Within two years of returning to the United States, Jim quit a fast-track career in corporate finance with GE to start a nonprofit organization, now called buildOn. Its goal is to break the cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and low expectations in America’s poorest inner cities as well as in rural villages in developing countries. Under Jim’s leadership, buildOn’s volunteers have contributed more than 1 million hours of service to their communities, and the organization has constructed more than 525 schools worldwide. Jim lives in Stamford, Connecticut, with his wife and children.

James S. Hirsch is a bestselling author who has written broadly and insightfully on race, sports, and the human drama behind topics ranging from the military to medicine. His books include biographies of sports icons Willie Mays and Rubin “Hurricane” Carter; narratives on POWs in Vietnam and race riots in the South; an investigation into diabetes, America’s most serious health epidemic; and a collaboration with Governor Deval Patrick of Massachusetts. Prior to becoming an author, Hirsch worked for twelve years as a staff writer for the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. He lives in the Boston area with his wife and children.