

CHANGE *not charity*

In a majority world, Australia is part of the minority. With 80 per cent of humanity living on less than \$10 a day, most trying to survive on much less, many struggle for the basics we take for granted. Caitlin Ganter spoke to CEO and philanthropist Anthony Ryan who has witnessed the effects of absolute poverty and is on a mission for change.

Not many of us would volunteer to wade through a dumpster, but to Anthony Ryan, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

At 24 years old, Anthony was no stranger to the plight of the less fortunate. His mother had instilled in him compassion for others from a young age, and so he travelled to Washington DC to volunteer with the homeless.

"My brother was based in Washington as part of the Catholic Workers Movement. I went over to work with them to help feed the homeless," said Anthony.

"It appealed to me because it was providing a context for a Catholic person to do something gritty and real, to get involved with the people we were trying to support. At one point, I was digging through a dumpster because we heard

a market was throwing away decent food – it was an eye opening experience, something that fascinated and inspired me to pursue something with greater meaning."

It was experiences like these Anthony said helped shape him. Twenty years later, Anthony is now the Chief Executive Officer of the Edmund Rice Foundation (Australia), a non-government organisation which supports sustainable development projects in developing countries.

"After visiting Washington, I quit the stockbroking degree I was studying and enrolled in education at ACU.

"To be honest, I was a terrible stockbroking student. I was scraping by in my degree, but because I had good contacts in the industry I had a fantastic traineeship

lined up. I didn't deserve it, I was just well connected. After working with my brother in Washington and having conversations with the homeless, I decided I wanted to do something different."

After becoming a teacher, Anthony continued to remain involved in community engagement. It was in 2005, during an immersion trip in South Africa leading a class of private Brisbane school students, he was exposed to a new level of poverty.

It was in a South African shanty town Anthony met a six-year-old girl named Mimiki. She was bed-ridden, in agony, and her head was swollen five times its normal size. She suffered from a manageable neurological disease her parents were too poor to have treated. Without treatment, Mimiki would die.



As Anthony watched her father sit at her bedside, lovingly massaging her feet, a seed was planted in his mind that would be the beginning of great things to come.

"Mimiki and her family were completely disempowered; her disease was treatable but there was nothing they could do to help her.

"The anger and confusion of a father whose daughter was dying needlessly was something that really stayed with me... how could it not? The situation was awful, but at that time there was nothing I could do. I didn't know how I could help – I just knew that I wanted to."

After meeting Mimiki, Anthony returned home and went back to his life as a teacher. It was at a bar in Brisbane while telling friends about his trip that the image of the little girl brought him to tears.

"I was catching up with my mates' telling them about my trip to Africa. When I started to talk about Mimiki, tears came to my eyes – something that is very unlike me. To my mate's credit, they didn't tell me to toughen up or forget about it, they asked more questions and we started to discuss what we could do."

It was that day Anthony, along with his two friends Sean Ryan and Mark Thompson, established the Mimiki Foundation, which provides aid and support to those people living on the margins of society. The foundation provides a strong link between the business community and advocacy groups in order to help realise a more just and compassionate world.

"Mimiki was a catalyst for us to offer something to the 25- to 45-year age group who were looking for a bit more meaning

in their lives. When you think back to high school, you remember promises you made and dreams you had about how you're going to change the world. But you get caught up in your ambition, your study, your job, your finances, and everything else goes on the back burner.

"It's good to want these things, but I also wanted greater meaning in my life, and I knew I wasn't the only one who felt this way. So my mates and I started the Mimiki Foundation – a small foundation that provided an outlet for people to reconnect with those old dreams from school.

"Unfortunately, Mimiki died from her illness. After we found out she had passed away we went back to visit her family and organised to have them relocated to a better living situation. We weren't able to save the little girl, but we were able to honour her memory."

Anthony continues to evolve and create new projects. After becoming CEO of the Edmund Rice Foundation in 2012, he began Gone Fishing, an East-African immersion program aimed at connecting decision-makers in corporate Australia with the people of Africa.

The program centres upon a 12-day immersion visiting a variety of projects supported by the Edmund Rice Foundation. It aims to provide a unique opportunity for individuals who are looking to attend a meaningful and challenging international professional development program, and seeks to harness and further develop the leadership, management and interpersonal skills of each attendee whilst at the same time presenting the human face of Africa with all its vibrancy and complexity.

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'We're the minority living in a majority-world, the majority being those who live in poverty. I don't want to allocate blame, I believe guilt mongering only makes people feel more helpless. We want to break out of the 'charity' mindset and challenge the corporate individual to make a difference through their skills and knowledge.'

"Gone Fishing is aimed at men and women who have influence over the decision-making structures that will determine the world of tomorrow – we are challenging corporate leaders in Australia and immersing them into the lives of those who live in poverty.

"The pilot program happened in February this year. Ten participants and I went to Nairobi, Kenya. Essentially, the idea is to show people who have influence, experience and skills the way life is for those who lost out in the free-market system."

The program provides a full experience of Africa, and Anthony and his group visited tourist destinations as well as poverty-stricken slums.

"It's important to know that this program isn't a charity. I'm looking for models and systems which allow us to address issues of poverty and disadvantage locally – the goal is to provide assistance when asked, but essentially we want to create a sustainable system.

"Our aim wasn't to bring a group of wealthy Australians to Kenya and pile guilt onto them. The idea is to bring the problems to their attention, I'll admit in a confronting manner, and empower them to make changes. This isn't about donations, it's about solutions.

"The reality is Australia is very lucky. We're the minority living in a majority-world, the majority being those who live in poverty. I don't want to allocate blame, I believe guilt mongering only makes people feel more helpless. We want to break out of the 'charity' mindset and challenge the corporate individual to make a difference through their skills and knowledge.

"Returning from our trip, the response was overwhelming. The program was an extraordinary success and these high powered corporate Australians are buzzing with the desire to do more. There is another

trip planned in October and we are already being approached – the interest for the program is excellent.

"This isn't a standard getaway, there are moments for the attendees which are really confronting, but that is the aim."

Anthony recalls a moving experience that occurred while visiting the Mary Rice Centre, a facility which focuses on the needs of physically and mentally challenged children in Kibera, one of Africa's largest slums.

One of the most densely populated urban settlements on Earth, Kibera houses up to one million occupants in small makeshift shacks. Infrastructure is poor to non-existent, with no sewage or government health facilities, and limited water and electricity.

"One experience that stands out for me was meeting Alfonso in Kibera. He has spina bifida, and five days a week his

mother carries him to the Centre. It takes her over an hour to carry him the two kilometres to the centre, but she does it twice each day. She is phenomenal.

"Wheelchairs aren't available or useable in the slum – so she does what she has to by carrying him to where he can get some basic care. At home, Alfonso and his mother don't even have a mattress to sleep on."

Although his career is demanding, Anthony is glad he followed the path of philanthropy.

"I never regret my decision to work in non-profit. I feel as though what I've witnessed creates internal scars that you will always know are there. No matter how much you try to ignore them, the scars are always calling to you to act. I think how you respond to this calling is what makes the person – I could never have simply put a bandage over the scar that Mimiki gave me, and I will always be thankful for it."

