

A man with short dark hair, wearing a blue and white striped short-sleeved shirt and light-colored trousers, stands in front of a textured, light-colored wall. He is smiling and has his hands in his pockets. The wall has a small square vent with horizontal slats. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

“IN TANZANIA
EVERYTHING YOU DO IS A
CHALLENGE
AND YOU ARE ALWAYS IN THE
LIMELIGHT
BECAUSE OF THE COLOUR
OF YOUR
SKIN.”

ROB CORK

INTERVIEWED BY KRIS MCINTYRE
PHOTOGRAPH KYLE SPENCE



Rob Cork's love of adventure developed pretty early on and he's already made a world of difference taking his skills as an environmental engineer into projects in Sisophon, Cambodia and Arusha, Tanzania. The combination of his quiet modesty, passion for permaculture and eagerness to pass on his knowledge is nothing short of contagious. It also made him the perfect guy to help bring an extraordinary project in Tanzania to life. Rob, a once self-confessed 'ski bum' has been working with an organisation called foodwatershelter which uses sustainable practices to improve the lives of vulnerable women, orphans and the broader community. You know the saying 'Teach a man to fish ...'? Well Rob has taken it quite literally, he's even helped the African community they're working with to build their own fish-farm!

Df What brings you to town?

Rob I'm down here for the fws management committee and board meeting that we hold in Sydney every three months or so. fws stands for foodwatershelter incorporated. It was started by five Australian women who met in Tanzania whilst volunteering on different programs there. They wanted to start a not-for-profit when they came back home.

Df What's it all about?

Rob Well, our first project is the home for vulnerable women and children we're building in Arusha in Tanzania, East Africa.

Df You say a 'home' not an orphanage?

Rob Yeah. We're very clear about calling it a 'home' versus some of the other terms used, such as orphanage, because we want to steer clear of some of the stereotypes that a term like 'orphanage' brings. We want to create a home environment that has everything that you and I expect of a home: family life, community and access to health and education.

Df What's your role with fws?

Rob I'm the Environmental and Agriculture Advisor, but as our structure grows I'll move into the role of Permaculture Manager. My main role is to work with our permaculture team to set up our children's village, which we call Kesho Leo, to be sustainable. From our small amount of farming land we want to produce most of our own food, water, energy and building products with the eventual, rather ambitious, aim of eventually having it fund itself through small business.

Df So the goal is not to be sustainable just in terms of environmental practices?

Rob No, it's much more. We aim for 'sustainability' in four key areas; economic, environmental, social and organisational.

Setting the project up to be sustainable in terms of environmental impact is almost the easy part.

The more difficult part is working towards economic sustainability so that what we produce from our farm and gardens can eventually fund the project (*see page 36 *Of their own accord*). Education is a big part of that too, because a lot of what we are doing has relevance for our neighbours and subsistence farmers. We're doing it in a way that we can educate them.

Df The fws model is quite unique isn't it?

Rob Yep, sustainability is a word that gets thrown around a lot these days and is often used incorrectly, but for us, it means that within 15 years we want the organisation to be Tanzanian-run.

Df So it's sustainability and self-sufficiency you're aiming for?

Rob I think that is what most of us at fws think development work is about. It's not fair for residents in developing countries to think that they need to rely on others forever. We want to give them the opportunity to be educated and learn so they can get onto that first rung of the ladder and then run with it.

Df You're based in Australia now, but you've spent a lot of time in Tanzania. How did you end up doing what you've done?

Rob Yeah, well that goes back a bit. I suppose it starts in 2003 when I went to Arusha for a month on a different project. It was



Photographs courtesy of fws

the month that 'ruined' my life.

After that it was good-bye to the idea of a white picket fence and golden Labrador

and all that.

- Df** Did you have a white picket fence?
- Rob** No, definitely not! I'd just finished five years at University studying Environmental Engineering and Natural Resource Management. I was inspired by one of my lecturers who had a background in setting up water irrigation systems in developing countries. I also came across Gemma Rice from the School of St Jude [in Tanzania] and went to volunteer there for a month. When I was there I meet Rebecka Delforce, Edwina Hammond, Shona Arneil, Kelsey Wilson and Anne O'Donoghue who became the founding members of fws. It was only for a month, but I really enjoyed my time there and left wanting to go back. But, I also knew that when I did that I wanted to be able to offer something more.
- Df** And after that?
- Rob** I had a two-year lay-off in Canada living as an outdoor bum. I was working as a white-water rafting guide, doing a lot of skiing, climbing and things like that. Then I came back to Australia and started working which gave me a lot of the skills that I've been able to use in Tanzania.
- Df** That was in environmental engineering?
- Rob** Yeah, a lot of work in regional Australia working on agricultural and environmental projects, but I always knew that I wanted to go back overseas and do something else, but I didn't know exactly what or what skills I'd need. I'd heard really good things about some of the international programs funded by the Australian Government through AusAid. I applied for the Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development program and ended up being sent to Cambodia. I spent a year there working as a volunteer on an agricultural and community development program. There were still a lot of land mines in the area and after they were removed, my job was to work with local staff to assist the farmers to get back on their feet by developing their knowledge of farming, access to water and small business development. It was an amazing experience.
- Df** And from Cambodia you went to Tanzania?
- Rob** Yep, in early 2006, I got a call from Beck, not long after the fws ladies had started up, asking if I wanted to be involved. That began the fws odyssey for me. Over the following months there were plenty of late-night phone calls with Beck talking through ideas and concepts. It's pretty amazing to think back to those early days now. I had a two-week stopover in Australia and then was on the ground in Tanzania. I told my mum I was only going for three months, and I even tried to convince myself, but I think everyone knew it was going to be much longer than that.
- Df** How did your mum feel about it all?
- Rob** Mum has always been very supportive. When I think about what got me into this outdoorsy, volunteering and development work lifestyle I have to say a lot of that goes back to the upbringing I had. I grew up on a farm in Northern New South Wales near Dorrigo. All our family holidays and weekends were camping trips (*see page 38 *Camping love*). When I was as young as three or four we spent seven months travelling through Northern Australia living in a tent the whole time. So when mum sees us kids doing adventurous stuff she can't say too much about it because it was probably her and Dad that led us down that path!
- Df** And when you arrived in Kesho Leo what was your mandate?
- Rob** I think it was to learn through doing – and still is. To do this kind of project I couldn't go in with the assumption that what I thought to be 'correct' from my university education in Australia or even from what I learnt in Cambodia. We've all learnt a lot through working with the local community and there's been a big exchange in both directions of learning



*Of their own accord

by Claire Thomas

For something to be truly sustainable, it isn't only a matter of how materials are used in its production, but also whether or not it is economically and socially viable in the long term. Zambikes, bikes made in Zambia from locally-grown bamboo, are that and more.

Americans Dustin McBride and Vaughn Spethmann travelled to Zambia in the summer of 2004. Nearing the end of the trip, Spethmann borrowed a bike for a ride. He found it hard to overlook the shoddy state of the locals' bikes. Their frames were cracked, rims bent, spokes were missing and they were covered in more rust than dust. Later, over a meal after a soccer match, McBride and Spethmann asked their local opposition how they spent their days. They replied that they didn't have jobs.

McBride and Spethmann wondered, what if they could train these guys, and others in the same situation, to make cheap, but great quality bikes out of local materials? Not only would they have

employment, but better bikes would be available for other locals to get around on, increasing their mobility and ability to carry goods to market.

When properly managed, bamboo is one of the most sustainable materials around; it is rapidly-renewable (restoring itself in just five years), requires far less energy to harvest and produce than most 'lumber' products, is light and strong. What you might not know is that it is also a natural shock-absorber, making it particularly good for making bikes out of.

Zambikes became an official Zambian company in September 2007 with four founder/directors; McBride, Spethmann and two Zambians - Gershom Sikaala and Mwewa Chikamba. Not only does Zambikes create standard bicycles, they've also developed innovative designs like the 'Zambulance', designed to carry sick people to hospitals in places where other means of transportation aren't adequate or always available, and the 'Zamcart' to cater to the farming community, marketeers and small businesses.

To date, more than 1,200 bicycles and 153 Zamcart and Zambulance bike trailers have been distributed. "Medical workers, teachers, entrepreneurs and others are able to do their jobs more efficiently and effectively with their Zambikes," Spethmann says. They have also landed a massive coup. An American company called Bamboosero has commissioned Bambikes to supply them with bikes for the US market.

Most of the Zambikes' team members had been unemployed or living in less-than-adequate situations. Now, they all have a unique story of how their lives have changed since receiving training and employment from Zambikes. McBride and Spethmann hope to be able to leave the company in the hands of the Zambian people once it is fully established in six or seven years, thus making Zambikes a truly self-sustaining business whose spokes turn of their own accord.

www.zambikes.org

Photographs courtesy of Zambikes.

and educating.

Df Is education a big part of what fws does?

Rob Very much so. It's hugely important to what we do and we try to use a number of different tools to provide education – many of them we think are quite subtle. We've put ourselves in what we think is a unique position. There are a number of things we do, but

the most important single technique is that we teach by doing.

For example we have a volunteer village which is separate to the children's village. That's intentional because we want the kids living at Kesho Leo to grow up as Tanzanians in their own country. We don't want them growing up in an environment that teaches them only the ideals of Westerners. Also, in our volunteer village, we use compost toilets and our water supply is rainwater ... things that we are trying to encourage our subsistence farming neighbours to try. We are doing it first;

we're not Westerners staying in a five star hotel while telling them to use a compost toilet.

It's much easier to provide an education opportunity if you're prepared to live it yourself. It's very much the ripple in the pond-type effect.

Df Was it difficult to get the ripple started?

Rob In some ways, yes. We're only just starting to see what we think is the beginning of it. But there have also been a few really simple things we've done to get it happening. Like in our building project, led by Rob Watson and Darren Stratti, we could have used builders from Nairobi or trained people from the city, but we didn't. Instead we employed subsistence farmers who lived within a kilometre of our land. They were completely untrained when they started – in fact most of them could barely swing a hammer – and that slowed our building down a lot. But now, within the space of two years, we've got a lot of Tanzanians who have worked with Western volunteers and been taught how to build. Now they have quite good skills and are moving on to other vocational training options, not to mention the timber beds, coffee tables and doors they've made for their own homes.

Df So it's about engaging the local community to enhance their own lives?

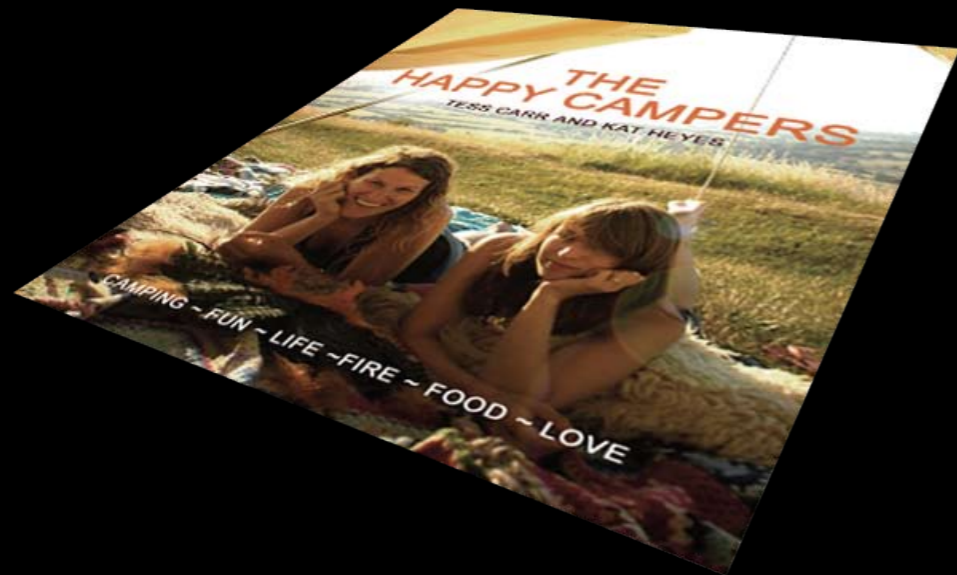
Rob We've always said it is a community project, not ours. We are just facilitating it, and there are obvious benefits in getting local people to build it. In 10 years, if there are problems with the building structure or maintenance is needed, there's local people who'll be able to deal with it. And most importantly, they'll actually care because they've been involved in the project from the start and have some ownership in it.

Df And that's also created job opportunities for the local villagers beyond the building project at Kesho Leo.

Rob Yeah, like the guys who worked for us and then were employed by the biodigester system contractors.

Df The biodigester system?

Rob It's a very simple system that is becoming particularly popular in developing countries, and even on a bigger scale in places like Australia. It takes organic waste like manure, human waste or food scraps and breaks it down through a process of anaerobic decomposition (meaning without oxygen) to produce methane gas. I guess the easiest way to describe it is



*Camping love by Tess Carr and Kat Heyes

1972 Tess is born in the winter and looks like a bald chicken.

1978 Kat is born in the winter and looks like a fat Eskimo.

... The camping gene is injected by their respective families who take them camping around Britain, every year, year in year out, rain or shine.

1991 It's Kat's first day at big school. Trying desperately to appear invisible she sits in the hall reading *Tiger Eyes* by Judy Blume. Two boys, one with a red bandana one with a blue, come in and start messing around. The headmaster appears and tells the boys off. They give up messing around and come to introduce themselves to Kat. Their

names are Fred and Rob.

1998 Kat goes to Brighton to visit a friend and bumps into Fred. She hasn't seen him since school. He had grown into such a handsome chap (minus the bandanna luckily). Love is in the air! A crucial moment in their story; Fred introduces Kat to his sister, Tess. She's fresh from a trip camping round Australia. Fun, food, laughter and camping flourish and the perfect summer seems to stretch on forever ...

2000 Friends meet friends, become friends, become family. camping trips, holidays, festivals, parties, Christmases with the rest of the happy campers become part of all their lives.

2004 Tess has a light bulb moment. There's no book out there for people like them; they're not into survival or snazzy equipment, but they love camping! No one's spreading the word about campfires, shooting stars, treasure hunts and making kites, so why don't they? With Tess's bright idea and Kat's art skills they begin to make a mock up of the book.

2006 Kat and Fred are married in Cornwall. Love is in the air! Tess and Kat are now officially sisters! The book is finished and *The Happy Campers* is published in April 2007. Visit www.thehappycampers.co.uk for camping recipes, ideas to inspire summer fun under canvas and stars.

like an underground igloo that takes a mixture waste and water in one end and produces methane gas out the other. The gas rises to the top of the igloo and is piped up into our kitchen so we have a sustainable source of cooking gas. It can also be used for lighting and to generate electricity, but we won't be doing that. We also end up with a slurry that we use on the gardens as an organic fertiliser.

Df So it's cooking with gas and more! How many Westerners are involved in the project?

Rob We have an average of 10 volunteers at any one time on the ground in Tanzania. They include seven key 12-month positions including an onsite manager, an accountant and other roles covering health, education, environment, maintenance and social work. We also have a few shorter term volunteer roles. In Australia we also have a huge network of supporters who do everything from running fundraisers, to building our website, to managing our financial and legal affairs.

Df And how many Tanzanians are involved in the project?

Rob We probably peaked at employing about 50 Tanzanians full-time during the construction phase and that was a huge boost to their local community. Obviously, that number reduces as we move into the operation phase. Every one of our volunteers in Tanzania works with a counterpart. We don't just send a nurse to work in Tanzania – they need to work with a Tanzanian and

*they are not just passing on their skills
but exchanging knowledge*

with their local counterpart. We'll soon have a least one

full-time professional Tanzanian in each sector and then we've continued trying to employ as many subsistence farmers and vulnerable women as we can within the variety of roles that a home of up to 100 residents will need. Obviously, we can't have everyone come and live in Kesho Leo and we can't employ everyone who needs assistance, but we've tried to create as many opportunities as possible.

Df What was the process that fws went through in recruiting the women who will look after the children?

Rob Initially there will be eight 'mamas' moving in to look after 40 or so children. When our original members got there and started identifying opportunities to assist, they quickly realised that the support for women in a lot of these places is almost non-existent. There are a lot of single mothers who may have been widowed through an illness like HIV, deserted by the father of their children, or worse, and many have no one to turn to. Through the process of working out what was needed, we realised we could help vulnerable children *and* women. Shona organised an open day very early on to recruit the mamas. We had more than 70 women apply for roles and that was just through advertising in local shops within a 5km radius. We've only started with employing eight mamas, but we've got positions for 16 as we consolidate, but that's still nowhere near the 70 that turned up on that first day.

Df Was it difficult to choose those that made the cut?

Rob Shona and Kelsey had that difficult task. We've selected those that can be good role models for the children. We've since worked with the eight selected mamas for 18 months so, before we even move in, we know them relatively well. They've also had a lot of training in everything including health, parenting, financial management and the environment. Our current project manager, and one of the founding members of fws, Kelsey, is a social worker. She's been in Tanzania for over two-and-a-half years. She knows her role well but is still realistic enough to know she can't counsel Tanzanians because she's not Tanzanian. There are local counselling services and Kelsey has worked with them to set up women's support groups and things like that. It's amazing to see how some of these women have developed from when they first started. Many weren't able to look you in the eye and some were very ill. So to see them walk up to a visitor and very proudly and politely say, "This is our farm," and witness how they have become leaders in their community is ... We hope



Photograph courtesy of JWS

that'll give other women inspiration to help themselves.

Df What has inspired you most about this work?

Rob *It's a mix of feeling like you are on an amazing adventure, getting to know incredible people, and helping people*

who need or appreciate an offer of assistance. People back here in Australia often ask, "Do they really want your help?" But having felt the warmth from the Tanzanians whenever I or another volunteer returns, there is little doubt that the majority of our neighbours appreciate what we are doing.

Df What were the biggest challenges that you faced professionally and personally?

Rob Hah, the challenges are almost indescribable at times! One of the biggest is just living and working in Tanzania. You're in a pretty intense environment and, yeah, you might have a core group of five or ten volunteers around you, but that creates stresses in itself. You don't really get the opportunity to 'turn off'. Living in Australia you tune out on the drive or ride home and, if you stop in to a shop to buy a bottle of milk, it's not difficult. In Tanzania everything you do is a challenge and

you are always in the limelight because of the colour of your skin

and who we are in the community. You can't just go out and buy a litre of milk without it being a big trip. Even though you think you get used to it, that's still quite challenging and I think it gets to a lot of people at a certain point.

Df And the cross-cultural challenges?

Rob There's a very different mindset that Tanzanians work under and I'm careful to call it 'different levels of education' – it's definitely not different levels of intelligence. You can find yourself working with very talented and capable people who've never been beyond third grade, or they might have made it to sixth grade, but there were 100 to 200 students in the same classroom so they've effectively had very little education other than through life. That creates a lot of challenges in explaining processes and things like that. Then there's the short-term attitude of many Tanzanian subsistence farmers. When you are a subsistence farmer you are not really worried about saving seeds to plant your crop next year because you are more worried about being able to feed your children tonight. It's much easier for us to think about what Kesho Leo is going to be like in 10 to 15 year's time because we don't need to worry about what we're going to eat for dinner tonight.

Df It's easy for us as Westerners to assume that because they are subsistence farmers they'll understand the concept of sustainability but that is not necessarily the case?

Rob No, and that's what we are trying to teach on our own farms. A classic example is the organic gardens we are setting up to provide food for our 50 to 100 residents. We've employed local people to dig the gardens and we've trained all our mamas in how to make compost. Some of them have become very apt at that so it's very funny when you might say, "Mama Elizabeth, I think it's time to turn the compost," and she says, "No, no, Tuesday." We are teaching these techniques by employing people to do the work, and that has been really successful, but we are competing with the ideals of conventional farming techniques like the use of pesticides and fertilisers which, if not managed well, can have



*Thumbelina

by Kate Bezar

I don't know if I have a naturally green thumb, but I would dearly love to. I have actually never really given it the opportunity to show me what it's made of and I suspect that if it's ever going to reach its emerald potential, it needs more than a few sorry pot plants to inspire it.

Hence it is with both excitement and trepidation that I am about to move houses, or more accurately, move from an apartment to a house, and one with an established vegetable garden no less.

In anticipation I have armed myself with a few tools. Being generally more comfortable with written matter than bio-matter, a key element of my arsenal is *Harvest: A Complete Guide to the Edible Garden* by Meredith Kirton which promises to "help even the most novice gardener grow their own produce." Apparently *Harvest* will "inspire me to grow, harvest and cook my own seasonal fruit, vegetables, herbs and spices, whether my garden is a large suburban block, a small city courtyard, or in the

country." Sounds ideal!

Kirton's gardening 'bible' is providing me with the ideal pre-sleep read. I fall into the land of nod dreaming of digging up giant, earth-covered spuds, entering my pumpkins into competitions and having so many peppers I have to pickle the excess ... Stephanie Alexander's kitchen 'bible' *The Cook's Companion* might have to be the next thing on my bedside table. *'Harvest: A complete guide to the edible garden' by Meredith Kirton. Murdoch Books 2009. RRP \$69.95*



long-term, negative consequences on the farm. In the past, subsistence farming Tanzanians have been easily convinced by commercial companies that they need to use high-production seeds, fertilisers and chemicals. These are people who can barely afford to put food on the table and are now paying more and more every year for chemical solutions. They see that they'll produce a great maize crop for the first few years, but they don't see that in five or so years the soil condition is likely to decline.

Df So how did you get around that change in thinking?

Rob Again it was leading by example. I expected it to take at least five years for us to set up an organic garden and get natural systems working, but we've been very lucky to have a volunteer, Eve Archbold, who has amazing horticultural skills and has settled into the project like you wouldn't believe. She's managed to set up the organic gardens so they've become productive very quickly.

Our neighbours have seen that we are not spending money on fertilisers and chemicals,

and that

if need be we can make sprays out of simple ingredients like chilli and garlic. By them working on our farm and seeing it start from scratch and become quickly productive ... There's no way I could have walked in and given a lecture saying, "You shouldn't use chemicals, you should go organic." Apart from the fact that an alternative solution needs to be provided, it just wouldn't have worked.

Df How long did it take to get the garden producing?

Rob Under two years, and it was perfect timing. As an environmental engineer I've got skills in shifting dirt and water, but when I finish a job there's lots of big ugly holes and piles of dirt everywhere. So when Eve and her green thumb arrived she took those piles of dirt and holes in the ground and made them productive (*see page 42 *Thumbelina*). She also has a great talent for adapting to the local skills and using Tanzanian ideas.

Df Have there been practices that the local workers have seen at Kesho Leo and taken back to their own homes?

Rob That's just starting to happen, which is very exciting. One example is the fish ponds we've just built. Fish farming is not new to the area - there are other NGOs that have done it, but as far as I know it's never existed on a very small, subsistence farming level. When we built ours I was strategic in paying local men to dig the ponds. They are 10 by 15 metre ponds, 1.5 metres deep so that's a lot of dirt they had to shift. I could have got an excavator in and it probably would have been cheaper than the labour cost; it certainly would have been a lot quicker, but that would have been a reason for our neighbours to have never taken on fish farming themselves. They would have looked at our fishponds and thought the only reason we could have built them was because we could afford an excavator. Instead we've taught them they can do it too. They were around when we put our first fingerlings in and when we had our first harvest and the big celebratory lunch afterwards. Just recently, some of our neighbours have gone to start their own farm or have motivated their extended families to get together and dig their own, smaller and more manageable ponds. That's about five years ahead of where I thought it would be.

Df Does the produce grown on the farm feed the village?

Rob It was our plan that it would and, yes, this is something that we are now developing. It also plays a part in where we want to take the project to being economically sustainable within 10 to 15 years. It's a huge goal. We've got access to about two hectares of farming land and are creating small business opportunities. We're teaching the mamas to do arts and crafts and have purchased a few sewing machines to help build that little cottage industry. But to create a sustainable business for 50 to 100 people, when you have school fees, uniforms and cooking pots to buy,



Photographs left and following pages courtesy of fws

is pretty difficult. A lot of the produce, like fish, we'll consume on site, but we also hope to drive ourselves into a higher-end market. We are just outside the city of Arusha (the gateway to Kilimanjaro and the Serengeti) so it has a lot of five star hotels and tourists. There's also a UN base here so there are a lot of Westerners who want to buy organic vegetables so we can tap into that market by selling to restaurants. That's how we hope to drive economic sustainability by making a bigger profit. It's about taking advantage of access to markets, bringing our neighbours with us so they benefit too, and trying to make it economically sustainable.

Df I understand that fws has been somewhat of a role model for other NGOs?

Rob Yeah. If you took the bits and pieces of what we are doing, you wouldn't necessarily say that what we are doing is that different from what some others have done in the past, but

when you put all the aspects of fws together you do get a very all-inclusive, integrated and unique project.

Like, we are creating a home for the mamas so they'll live in a family unit with five children, a mix of their own and the orphans they welcome. Some other NGOs have done that, but the residents tend to stay within the institution and don't have much access to the outside environment. Our children will be attending the local government school. We know that in their classes they are likely to have 100 to 200 kids, that it will be very under-resourced and that the teacher may or may not turn up. So the level of education that they get there may not be as good as what we could offer them, but the access to and participation in the community is the important thing. Then, when they return in the afternoons, they'll get access to further education in our village. Without being derogatory to the Tanzanian school system, going to school is almost part of their social and life education, while maths, English and Swahili education will be taught at Kesho Leo.

Df The best of both worlds.

Rob Yes, what we are doing is very unique again in that we've got everything working together. On the smaller farm

we've integrated livestock with the biodigester, with composting, a food forest, contour drain systems, organic gardens, fishponds

and duck ponds. A lot of other projects have those things but they are separate. They might have a biodigester and well-designed livestock sheds or fishponds, but to have it all working together as one system, where our neighbours can come and see what we've done and replicate it in their own backyards, is very unique. Even the farm integrates with the education of the resident mamas and children. About 80 per cent of Tanzanians are rural-based so we want the children who come and live in Kesho Leo to grow up with a good understanding of agriculture in their own country. Having access to the farm ties into the home life of the children.

Df We've all heard stories about corruption and bribery in Africa. Have you found that has been an issue for fws?

Rob We've got around most of those issues because we are working on a local level. We've got to know the people and because the community want the project it's been a lot easier. It's a very different process compared to in Australia where you have to get approvals *before* you do things. In Tanzania, you basically do or build it, and then get it approved. We're now





at the stage where we've got our project almost complete in terms of construction, so now we're getting sign off from the education department, the department of social welfare and health. It might take 12 months, but you get there. There are stories with that, too. We have had officials come and look at the project and they'll say, "I'd love my child to come and live here", but we've got to say, "But your child is not vulnerable and not an orphan.". After you get around that you can avoid being involved in any corruption, but it's a long process.

Df Well, I guess, for one thing you can't afford it.

Rob No, that's not a good way to spend donors' money [laughs] and we're not there to promote bribery and corruption. Anyone who's lived or worked in developing countries can understand that it can be pretty challenging and it takes a lot of time. The local government and the Department of Social Welfare love our project. They are wary of a lot of Western orphanages and there is a local policy of no orphanages because of the institutionalisation and stereotype of children being taken from their extended families away from the Tanzanian world and put into a Western world. All those things we have planned ahead to tackle in a new, innovative way - and it's getting a great response from local officials.

Df How has fws been funded?

Rob It started with masses of hard work from a lot of volunteers in Australia. It was everything from a fundraising movie night that would make \$500 to a gala dinner in Sydney that might raise over \$50,000. We hadn't built anything and it was difficult to prove we were serious to potential funders, but as the project gained momentum we gained more support. We're starting to get more long-term interest and we hope, funding, but those volunteers with a small contribution of time or money are still very important to us.

Df Do you find that many of those donors go over to Tanzania to see the project?

Rob We do get some level of interest, but

a trip to Africa is pretty intimidating for a lot of people.

We have a core group of long-term volunteers, but also have space for short-term volunteers that we rotate to allow that opportunity. I mean I started off my work in developing countries after a month in Tanzania so it seems fair to give others that opportunity.

Df Is that common among volunteers that they'll go for a month and decide to stay longer?

Rob Most find it changes their outlook on Africa, and life, a lot. Some people still struggle to let go of the Western ideals of needing to settle down, have a job and pay off a mortgage and stuff. I mean that's quite hard to break clear of. I was just talking to a friend who's brought a house in Dee Why about that this morning. But, I think for a lot of people, once they've been somewhere like Tanzania or Cambodia, it changes them and they want to go back at some time if they can fit it in.

It's rare to have people come back saying, "I never want to do that again."

Df How has your life perspective changed from your experiences in Cambodia and Tanzania?

Rob A lot of people say the hardest part of this kind of experience is coming home. It's very easy to look at our society and say it's very wasteful and superficial, but you have to be realistic and accept this is the life that we were born into. I think for most people, including myself, when you get back from a trip like that, you go through stages where you look at what's

around you and think, what I could do for people in Tanzania with that money? But, you do have to get to a place where you don't forget and you try to help, but you also have to be realistic and say, this is our society and culture.

Df So how have you adapted to coming back home to Australia?

Rob To avoid that reverse culture shock, I was very careful to come back to what was basically my previous life – my previous job, my previous town, my previous friends – and I've found that has made it a lot easier to integrate. I was working again within six days of returning. A lot of people I know have had three months off which just gives more time to think about how much you loved living overseas. I also keep myself quite involved in fws. It's a fine line between being too involved and trying not to micro-manage, but assisting the people on the ground there.

Df Do you think you'll settle for the white picket fence one day?

Rob I'm sure I'll settle for some version of it. I met my partner, Erin, in Tanzania, and she's American. It feels like we'll have multiple homes here in Australia, the US and back in Tanzania, so who knows where the white picket fence will end up.

What we've lived and travelled through in Africa is something we'd never be able to turn our backs on,

not

to mention my experiences in Cambodia. I'm not sure exactly where those experiences fit in terms of our future life, but I'm sure the combination of the US, Australia and a few other places will feature. It looks like, at least for a while, we'll be moving around.

Df Where do you think your next adventure is?

Rob I'm still very committed to what's happening in Kesho Leo and I'll hope to get back there for a stint. At some stage I'd like to get into professional development. You can't afford to volunteer forever, but I'd like to take the grass roots skills that I learnt and work in emergency relief. That would just create a whole new set of challenges. I mean, Tanzania is relatively stable compared to what I could end up in.

Df And where to next for fws? Is there a view to going into other communities after this one is done?

Rob Everything that we do is done in a very planned way. Our first job is to consolidate what we are doing at Kesho Leo. We know it's going to take time, but

we want to avoid that stereotype of setting something up and going, "Sweet, job well done", dusting off our hands and walking off.

There are a few

different paths that we could take. I think that we'll probably lean towards extending that ripple in the pond effect. I'd like to see us do another project, maybe 50 km away from Kesho Leo. I have no doubt that fws will keep growing from strength to strength; it's just a question of whether that path will take us to other countries or settle us in Tanzania for a while where we've got contacts, where we know the language and how things work.

Df If you were to give advice to anyone wanting to pursue a path like yours, what would you say?

Rob I'd say, give it a go. It's certainly not for everyone, but if the calling is there you are almost being unfair on yourself if you don't respond to it. Try to live somewhere else at least for a month; that's how it started for me. I think it gives you that extra outlook that could change your life. 🍌

Photograph courtesy of fws

