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There comes a time in a lot of people's lives where an epiphany is had and action is needed. For Rebecka Delforce, president of charity organisation Food Water Shelter (FWS), her "moment of clarity" came while driving down a Sydney road on the way to her former job.

"In 2002 I was working as the deputy editor of a very successful food magazine for a terrific company," she explains. "Mid-year, the magazine was put up for tender and purchased by a different publishing house. Almost immediately, our magazine and the way things were done began to change. One morning, on my way to the new premises, I realised that I no longer loved my job, that in fact, I barely liked it and would very soon, if things kept going the way they were, actually hate it!"

It was at this point her epiphany pointed her

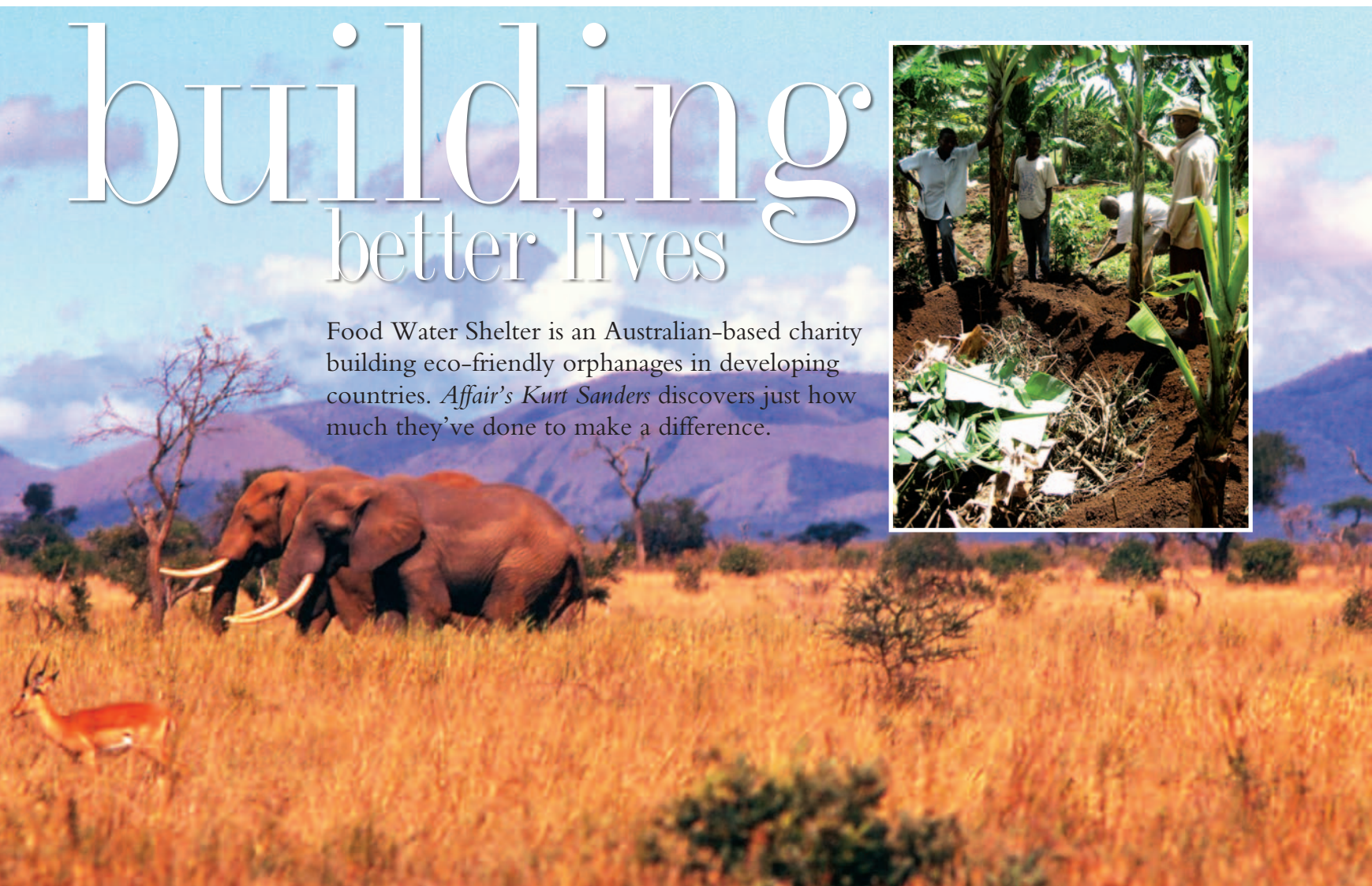
in the exact direction she was intended for all along. "I pulled my Jeep to the side of the road and had a little conversation with myself," she says. "Could 'the universe' be finally, finally, forcing you to do that little thing you've always said you wanted to do... Go help in Africa? A warm rush of relief swept over my body, so I whacked the Jeep into first, drove to work and resigned."

The eventual result of Delforce's spontaneous resignation is FWS, a charity organisation set up by her and four other friends to build eco-friendly orphanages in developing countries. The first of such villages is Kesho Leo (Kiswahili for "tomorrow today"), currently under construction in Arusha, Tanzania.

Delforce explains there isn't much government data available, but a report from the Social Welfare Department indicated the number of orphaned children in Tanzania was estimated

building better lives

Food Water Shelter is an Australian-based charity building eco-friendly orphanages in developing countries. *Affair's Kurt Sanders* discovers just how much they've done to make a difference.





to be 1.2 million in the year 2000, mostly due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This obviously points to Arusha being the perfect place to start out their philanthropic work, a place where women and children are in desperate need of help.

The orphanage will eventually house up to 40 orphans along with several “house mamas”, local single mothers who want shelter, a family atmosphere and an income to help care for the children in the village. Delforce says they will allocate five children to just one house mama, ensuring the kids receive proper attention and the mamas aren’t overworked.

She describes Arusha as a “hustling bustling melting pot of dust, sweat, bright fabrics, street peddling commerce, safari makers, fresh produce and banged up taxis”, and says the locals are excellent to work with. “[They’re] great fun,” she admits. “We have not been extremely successful at mastering the Swahili language, nor they English, so we’ve come up with a ‘Swenglish’ to communicate with and are doing quite well. Mind, nobody else in the country would ever go close to understanding our conversations with locals, but we certainly get by.”

And the effects of their work are certainly catching on. “One of our wins here is the impact we’ve been able to have on locals via only employing farmers from the area we are working in,” she explains. “Yes, we



could have employed qualified labourers from town, but we wanted to employ the subsistence farmers in our area and teach them building skills. Daz [FWS Building Team Manager] and Corky [Environmental Advisor] have spent a lot of time over the past six months educating these guys about concreting, carpentry, roof-making, wall-erecting... so many things.”

The design and construction of the orphanage has all been made with an eco-friendly focus, and for this FWS engaged the services of noted Melbourne architect Robert Watson. He says he found the whole project really attractive from the start, and was delighted to be involved with such a group of dynamic young people. “The whole project – not just the design objectives – I found really attractive and for all the right reasons,” he explains. “The beauty of environmentally sustainable development (ESD) is that it’s not discriminatory, it can be very high tech and on the other hand it can be extremely low tech and passive, and it can be applied to any building anywhere in the world.”

Watson travelled to Tanzania on a fact-finding trip to discover just what he had to work with. “We knew we wouldn’t be able



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to get all the building materials we would like,” he admits. “But once I visited Arusha with Beck and her partner Darren – an experienced and knowledgeable building practitioner – we pretty quickly worked out what was available and what wasn’t, and to my surprise there isn’t too much you can’t get. However the big and ongoing problem is the quality of the material available.”

But Watson feels they have the building team to do the job right, and says to achieve what they are doing in that environment truly is an amazing feat. “From a construction perspective, Darren Stratti from FWS is in my mind a really amazing bloke,” he says. “He is incredibly hands-on, he is building our design to the letter in an extremely challenging environment, he is having to continuously educate an eager but inexperienced gang of workers, he is communicating in a foreign language trying to organise often nonexistent materials to turn up when he needs them, and whilst doing all this he hasn’t lost his drive and motivation to complete the project.”

Delforce agrees, and says their decision to design and build from an eco-friendly perspective follows universally what FWS is all about. “A lot of what drives FWS is about justice,” she says. “And we include the state of the environment in that. If the world doesn’t address climate change in a serious, proactive way today, who will suffer most? Us Westerners, with our doctorates, scientists, and expendable incomes? Or the subsistence farmers and less-than-a-dollar-a-day citizens of developing nations?”

But in the end, Delforce explains FWS has a long-term vision of sustainability, both environmentally and economically, with the



villages being structured so they will eventually fund themselves. “FWS’s policies have always been built around providing a long-term life change for those we help,” she says. “We will see our kids through school and then with sponsors’ help we’ll see them through either uni or vocational training. When it comes to our house mamas, we’ll set them up on a salary sacrifice matching scheme, whereby we’ll ask them to sacrifice a little of the salary they earn over their 15-year contract with FWS. We’ll match that, so when their time has come to leave, they will have enough money for a little house and farm plot of their own.” 

For more information about volunteering or donations to FWS, visit www.foodwatershelter.org.au

