

# hope & heartbreak

The Africans say it takes a village to raise a child, and five Australian women are taking that message literally. But their good work has not come without sacrifice as they mourn the senseless loss of colleague, friend and partner Darren Stratti, who was recently killed during a robbery in the village. By Francesca Newby.



PHOTOGRAPHY: (TOP) ANDREW LEHMANN HAIR & MAKE-UP: JAY JAY RALUWENHOFF OTHER PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF FOODWATERSHELTER, JANELLE GIBSON (WWW.AUSSIESFORPHANS.ORG) & LILITH KRUEGER

TRADING THE GRIM queues of the peak hour commute for the open plains of Africa was a lightning decision for Rebecka Delforce, president of non-profit organisation foodwatershelter. The side of the road is a relatively mundane place to experience something as exceptional as a genuine epiphany, but we have no say in where, or when, inspiration strikes. "It hit me while I was driving to work one morning," explains Rebecka. "I was the deputy editor of a terrific food magazine and had once really loved the job, but a period of change meant things were very different. I wasn't bouncing into work; I was dragging myself there."

Rebecka decided then and there to change her life. "One of my defining memories from childhood is the terrible images of the famine in Ethiopia," says Rebecka. "When I first saw them, they shocked me out of my view of the world and I vowed that one day I'd go to Africa and make a difference." Struck by the return of her childhood vision, Rebecka drove to her office and resigned. "That's when I knew there'd be no turning back," she laughs. With buckets of determination and a suitcase full of mosquito repellent and tampons, Rebecka boarded a plane to Tanzania a scant few months later.

"It was an enormous culture shock, but I also felt incredibly alive and absolutely sure I was doing the right thing," she says of her time volunteering as the sponsorship co-ordinator at The School of St Jude's in Tanzania. Meeting fellow volunteers kept her afloat. "When you're living in a seriously alien environment, surrounded by abject poverty, you seek each other out for a bit of sanity," she laughs. "Edwina was my room-mate, and Shona, Anne and Kelsey were all working at another school in the area." The five women would meet whenever their schedules allowed.

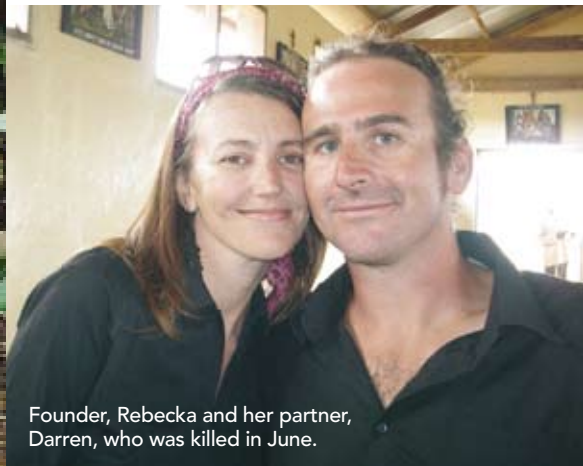
One thing all five women agreed on was the further need for substantial support for the phenomenal number of orphaned children in the region. "The idea for foodwatershelter came to me while I was sitting under an acacia tree reading a book to a group of children," recalls Rebecka. "When I finished, one of the girls ran up and threw her arms around my neck. She had tears streaming down her face and she said, 'Thank you, Miss



From left: Anne, Shona and Kelsey.



Edwina at Kesho Leo.



Founder, Rebecka and her partner, Darren, who was killed in June.

Rebecka, for reading us a book.' Then all the children lined up to hug and thank me. That's when I knew I had to do more, and when I realised exactly what I could do."

As an unpaid volunteer, Rebecka lived off her savings for a year, then returned to Australia with a mission. "Lots of people can volunteer, and it's an incredibly valuable contribution, but I'd realised it's just not enough for me. I wanted to do something bigger – something that would last after I'd left." Living in an affluent city like Sydney again was a shocking contrast

to the desperate need she'd left behind. "When you go from living in a place where people are literally starving, the ease and plenty of a city like Sydney can be so alienating," says Rebecka. Her response was to make foodwatershelter a reality.

It was at a party for Anne's 30th birthday that Rebecka's carefully nurtured plan came together. "I told all of the girls my idea and what I'd done so far to set it up," says Rebecka. Her announcement was met with immediate enthusiasm from the others and by the end of the evening, operation foodwatershelter was underway. "Kelsey announced she'd been researching the same area for months,

## community.

and had already found an orphanage we could aim to buy!" laughs Rebecka.

Scattered across three states, the five women spent two years in daily email contact, meeting face-to-face every three months. In 2007, Rebecka and her partner, Darren Stratti (who was tragically killed; see *A good life cut short*), flew to Tanzania to locate a site. "We spent two weeks on the ground organising the land purchase. They were the most hectic weeks of my life. By the time we flew back we still didn't know how much money we'd need, so we settled on a figure of \$100,000." The team spent six weeks fundraising in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane and raised \$80,000. They decided to proceed anyway and three weeks later, Rebecka and Darren returned to Tanzania to get the ball rolling.

"We hadn't given a moment's thought to the actual set-up of the house we'd bought," laughs Rebecka. "We arrived, completely exhausted, to discover it was literally a shell. We borrowed a mattress and hiked into town to start acquiring all the things we'd need just to eat, wash and live. It was a month before we were able to operate. A month that wasn't in the plan!"

The plan is the key to what makes foodwatershelter so different to other non-profit organisations and NGOs operating in Africa. "People come here and they fall in love with the beautiful orphans, they buy a house, set up a school or orphanage and then they think about the future," explains Rebecka. "We wanted to think about the future first and build something that would be sustainable. Why build something that doesn't last?"

Sustainability is the core value of everything foodwatershelter wants to achieve. "What we're building at Kesho Leo is a village for orphans," explains Rebecka. "It's designed to be safe and sustainable with a low ecological footprint." The village contains a cluster of sleeping huts, each one built to house one mama and five orphans. At the centre of the village is an education centre and a health clinic. The surrounding land is farmed by local volunteers and the Kesho Leo mamas and is designed to make the village largely self-sufficient for its food. Every decision is made on the basis that the village needs to be able to exist in its own right; a community that won't fall apart in the face of change, throwing the orphans back to fend for themselves.

"Right across Africa you've got



this band of missing people," explains Rebecka. "It's the mothers and fathers who are missing and the grandmothers and children who are left. The grandmothers try to care for the children, but they're exhausted." HIV and armed conflict have taken their toll, and everybody working in the field is faced with a crisis on an unimaginable scale. "In this area alone there are 17,000 orphans. We're taking 80." Rebecka pauses. "We had to learn that we can only do what we can do."

The testing environmental and economic turmoil only sharpens the need for ventures such as foodwatershelter. In affluent nations, the global food crisis may impact on family budgets and availability. In developing nations, it can tip things back to the desperation of famine, piling stresses on communities already ravaged by recent events. "If the village can feed those who live within it, then it can insulate them from scarcity and it can survive

famine," says Rebecka. "We want the locals to be able to come here and learn how to farm productively. Global warming is here; a commitment to environmental practices is no longer a luxury."

The most important thing the team has done is rooting foodwatershelter firmly in the local community. "We're talking constantly to our local elders, Tanzanian staff, neighbours, volunteers and other NGOs," says Rebecka. "There's no point in building something the locals don't understand." The team at foodwatershelter have been passionate about teaching local farmers the mistakes the West has made. "We talk about organic farming, permaculture systems that keep the nutrients moving around



foodwatershelter is building sustainable villages in Kesho Leo, Africa, to help give orphans a brighter future.



a plot of land, rainwater harvesting, crop rotation and about what we've learned in the West through getting it wrong."

The team quickly discovered that learning is a two-way street. "Corky, our environmental engineer, had spent time building water tanks in Cambodia. Good, solid, cheap water tanks that did the job and lasted, so that was in our plans. It was only once we were here we discovered how expensive cement is in Tanzania, so the plans had to change." Local expertise in materials, bureaucracy and transport is an important resource. Developing a team of local staff guarantees access to this knowledge, as well as helping the village become a genuine part of the community.

Kesho Leo is seven kilometres from Arusha, a bustling town on the Serengeti and Mt Kilimanjaro tourist trail. Its close proximity to such a vibrant hub has helped attract volunteers. Much of each day is taken up with managing the growing team as well as making sure everybody is capable of doing something productive, and that they're learning something. "We've built an eco-friendly village for the international volunteers so when they come here, they can learn to live on one

bucket of water a day like the locals do. Maybe they'll understand how wasteful we are to use nine litres of water every time we flush the toilet," says Rebecka.

Despite the rather stately pace of life in Tanzania, and more than their fair share of setbacks, the foodwatershelter team has made impressive progress. "Building is almost finished," says Rebecka. But there's little time for rest. "Once the village is up and running, and self-supporting, we have to think about where these kids go next. We can educate them, but that needs to be for life or it's pointless," she insists. "We need to build a vocational and residential centre in the village where they can keep being supported, keep learning and build a productive adult life. Then we'll build the next village, and the next."

Rebecka is looking forward to the next stage of life in Kesho Leo. "It's an absolute paradise here; it really is the Garden of Eden," she says. "It's so beautiful that sometimes it makes you feel guilty." While the land has worked its magic on Rebecka, and the rest of the team, she hasn't lost sight of why she's there. "When I was home working in magazines it was a nine-to-five life, and even then I was allergic to it," she explains. "When you live like that you wake up, think about yourself, go to work, make money for someone else, come home, think about yourself. You can't do that here. There's someone knocking on your door 24 hours a day needing you."

It's easy to ignore the problems of others when they're not literally knocking on our door. Relative affluence has an insulating effect on our ability to perceive the urgency of poverty and starvation. It can take the brave and determined actions of a woman like Rebecka Delforce, and all of the team at foodwatershelter, to remind us how much we are needed, and how much we have to give. "As a journalist, I hated the phrase 'there are no words'," says Rebecka. "But, there really are no words to describe the level of need here. It's our obligation to know we are privileged, to understand how much we have, and to face up to the fact we can choose to make a difference." Rebecka pauses, searching one more time for those missing words. "This is how change happens," she says. "We have to ask ourselves the questions and we have to make the changes. We have to look next door."

## A GOOD LIFE CUT SHORT

On Monday 30 June 2008, just as this magazine was going to print, Darren Stratti, Rebecka Delforce's partner and construction foreman for the Kesho Leo project, was shot during an attempted robbery at the village. Darren was trying to protect Rebecka and a number of other residents when a bullet pierced the wall of their hut and killed him. Darren was dedicated and passionate about the aims of foodwatershelter. His brother, Daniel Stratti, said: "He was a man who did what he believed in and lived a life doing this selfless thing so he could feel as though he had more purpose, doing what he was meant to be doing in his time here on earth." Foodwatershelter says building Kesho Leo will continue and the village will be completed in honour of Darren.



## HOW CAN YOU HELP?

foodwatershelter needs to equip the village homes with the necessities of life. It's running two campaigns to coincide with the end of construction. Kit Out Kesho Leo lets you donate specific items, such as a bed or a desk, directly to the village. Families For Families is a sponsorship program designed to encourage a group of six people to support a 'family' of six: a house mama and five orphans, in the village. For more information, visit [www.foodwatershelter.org.au](http://www.foodwatershelter.org.au).