

Giving a dam

From his Brentford home, Simon Maddrell is making a remarkable practical difference to the daily lives of African communities. Neil McKelvie meets an inspiring man...

As you read this, Brentford's Simon Maddrell will be trekking to the summit of Mt Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest mountain. The founder of Excellent Development, the self-help charity that he runs from his home near Griffin Park, has chosen an arduous way of celebrating 21 years of working with communities in Kenya – though it perfectly reflects the struggle he has had to realise his vision. And Simon is hoping that other West Londoners will follow in his footsteps this September, taking part in a fundraising expedition, the Kilimanjaro Challenge.

Before Simon left for Africa I met up with him to discover more about the charity that he has made a reality with the help of Joshua Mukusya, Excellent Development's 'one in a million man in Africa'. The story begins in 1984 when Simon took a Gap Year before university: 'I was 18 and it did feel as if I woke up one morning and decided, right, I'm going to Africa "to do something". However, having the idea was one thing – then I had to work out exactly what the hell was I going to do.' Through a Venture Scout unit Simon was introduced to Joshua, a Kenyan agriculturist who had pioneered an ingenious sustainable method of conserving precious water in drought-afflicted semi-arid areas. Joshua's simple model was to terrace land to get more water onto it during the rainy season, and then put in sand dams to keep more of the water in the

valleys. Together Simon and Joshua organized a youth expedition to work on a water conservation project (by coincidence, Simon set off for Kenya the morning after Live Aid in 1985). 'In a month, with Joshua's know-how, we constructed two dams, six barrages and 70 water tanks to collect rainwater from tin roofs.' And that was the start of the friendship between Simon and Joshua that is at the heart of Excellent Development.

Back in the UK Simon took a degree in international development and then started job-hunting in the charity sector. 'The Head of HR at Save the Children advised me to get a job to get some experience, which was fair comment. So I did, went back two years later and was told, you've only got work experience. It obviously wasn't meant to be.' Simon subsequently worked in a variety of roles – purchasing, project management, new product launches and supply chain operation – for Xerox. 'I always knew it wasn't what I wanted to do for the rest of my life – it just wasn't me.' But in fact that corporate experience has served him



Simon Maddrell

well with Excellent Development. 'It did give me a tremendous foundation in delivering new projects, making things happen and managing teams,' he says wryly.

In 2001 Simon took voluntary redundancy, but again had no luck finding a post in the development or charity world. 'I applied for 100 jobs and got two interviews. That's when the penny dropped – I thought to myself, what was my passion, what did I really believe in? And the answer was the brand of development using sand dam technology and terracing that Joshua has pioneered.' The two had kept in touch and with some of his redundancy money Simon decided to help fund a pilot tree-planting scheme to enhance the water retention benefits that the dams had already brought. 'The pilot was successful and so in January 2002 I decided that's it, if I can't get a job elsewhere, I'm going to launch Excellent Development,' he tells me. Charity status was granted in November 2002 and since then growth has been, in Simon's words, 'meteoric'. 'In 2002-3 turnover was £9000 and with two and a half months to go this year we're at £212,000. About 15% of that comes from running Gap Year expeditions, about 10% from public donations (from a fiver to £1000) and the rest from charitable trusts. Still being a relatively small charity we benefit hugely from regular donations; £3 a month can plant 12 trees, £5 a month will give two families clean water.'

September's Kilimanjaro Challenge is an exciting expedition specifically for people with only limited time to take off work (there are 10 and 16 day options). Participants will have the opportunity to climb the peak, raise money for Excellent Development, visit the projects and even help building dams. The Challenge is just one element of Simon's vision of the future. 'Our strategy is not to build another Oxfam. We want to focus on our model of self-help development.' And he stresses the self-help element: 'The people we help don't get anything for free. If a community wants to build a dam, then they must spend six months collecting the sand and stones necessary – and then spend two weeks building it. We provide craftsmen to help but they do the work – that way, it's their dam. Most don't know who or what Excellent Development is; they are aware of some people from outside who have provided input and support that they couldn't in a million years provide for themselves. And we just don't give out tree seedlings until we've seen the land is prepared – and it's bloody hard labour. In the last 12 months our communities have built 100kms of terracing (60 miles); you would do well to dig a two by two by two trench one yard long in an hour on the land.'

Simon's personal story is one of extraordinary perseverance. He and Joshua are now seeing more and more communities benefiting from the self-help model they have worked so hard to implement. 'One of the most rewarding things is when people from the communities we have worked with visit others who have given up hope of ever producing food from their land. They listen and suddenly realise there is some hope.' 🌍



excellent! For more information about the work of Excellent Development and the Kilimanjaro Challenge or to make a donation visit www.excellentdevelopment.com, call 020 8568 7118 or email simon@excellentdevelopment.com