

Áilín Quinlan tells how a moment of revelation became an inspiration

Reaching out

It was 2006 high in the mountains of South Vietnam when Cork-woman Colette O'Sullivan had her 'so this is what it's all about' moment.

She and a group, including Dubliner Helen O'Malley, had been trekking for days to raise money for Barretstown Camp, a specially-designed adventure camp for children with serious illnesses from Ireland, Britain and throughout Europe.

Suddenly the skies opened and the group was caught in a torrential rainstorm. Their bus, travelling behind with luggage and supplies, broke down in the flash floods, and it was late in the evening when the hikers finally trudged down to the remote valley — access was only by foot — to the primitive village which constituted that night's rest stop.

They were shown to their accommodation, and fed. To their surprise, late that night their baggage started to appear. It turned out, recalls Colette, that women from the village had waited about 12 hours for the bus — and the luggage.

When the vehicle finally arrived at the agreed rendezvous, the women collected the baggage and carried it — on foot — down the rough mountain pathways to the village. As a thank-you, the hikers collected money which they presented to the village.

"The villagers each made a huge personal contribution to help us, and we made a small monetary contribution to help them," says Colette, 38.

That resulted in a revelation which was to change her entire life: the small sum of money donated by the hikers was used to install a generator, which provided running water and electricity and utterly transformed the lives of the villagers.

"Suddenly we saw how far a little money could go."

It was an inspiration, both to Colette, who was, at the time, a highly paid consultant working in the corporate sector, and to Helen, who was an events organiser for Barretstown Camp.

"When I came back to Ireland I started thinking about how a little goes a long way and how I wanted to try to make a difference to peoples' lives.

A year later, the duo went on a charity trek to Lesotho.

Colette and Helen, in her 50s and a grandmother from Dublin's Shankhill area, met with Lesotho's Ambassador to Ireland, Mannete Ramail, a charismatic woman who explained to them the need for schools, medical centres and residential centres in Lesotho.

The women then visited a number of villages requiring assistance — which, as it turned out, was the inspiration they required to set up their hugely successful Lesotho Project Scheme.

On their return to Ireland, the women set up ACARA, named after the Irish word for friend. The organisation was established to help charities reach their fundraising targets by providing high-quality charity and corporate projects and challenges in Ireland and overseas.



FIELD-WORK: Colette O'Sullivan and Helen O'Malley with children from Phoku, where the ACARA Action Project built two classrooms.

From this, the ACARA Lesotho Build Project was established to build and facilitate the construction of safe houses — residential centres for orphans within the community — as well as schools and medical posts in the southern African state of Lesotho.

Lesotho has one of the highest rates in the world of people affected and infected by HIV and Aids.

"Mannete told us stories about the lives of the children that have been orphaned, losing both their parents because of this virus," explains Colette.

Things moved quickly.

The first ACARA Lesotho Build Project was completed in just 14 days in October 2008 by 60 volunteers.

"The ACARA House is a safe house for vulnerable children who have been orphaned, in many cases through HIV/Aids," says Colette. "This facility enables the children to attend local schools, learn life skills, help them integrate within their community and lead a normal life like every child deserves."

To make ends meet, Colette and Helen now work part-time as freelance consultants, Colette in the green energy sector, and Helen in events management.

To date, ACARA Action Projects has built a safe house facility for the orphans in Mafeteng, two classrooms in Phoku (a village in the mountains) and filled and shipped a

40ft container with clothing, toys and medical supplies.

On October 4 next, 40 ACARA volunteers, 12 of whom are from Colette's home city of Cork, jet out to Lesotho on a new Build Programme. Their objective? To construct two classrooms in the Mafeteng area and build a playground for orphans at the local safe house.

There's a lot of commitment required as each volunteer has to raise about €3,800 to cover the cost of flights, food and accommodation in Lesotho for the 18-day stay.

ACARA is also filling a 20-ft container with clothes and medical equipment — and trying to raise the €8,500 required to ship it to Africa.

The group gets no Government funding. As Colette explains, it's all down to the volunteers.

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lesotho.

Mountain Kingdom

LESOTHO, known as "The Mountain Kingdom" of Southern Africa, is an independent country totally landlocked by South Africa and is one of the six poorest African countries.

This small under-developed country has a population of about 2.3 million people. Its economy is based on limited agricultural production and light manufacturing.

A major challenge for Lesotho and its development partners is that half the population lives below the poverty line and income inequality is among the highest in the world. Decades of development gains have also been lost due to HIV/AIDS and efforts to reduce poverty and improve living standards have been severely undermined.

With a shortage of trained medical personnel and supplies, Lesotho is severely afflicted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. According to recent estimates, about 30% of Lesotho's population is HIV positive, one of the highest rates in the world. The United Nations projects that this will rise to 36% within 15 years resulting in a sharp drop in life expectancy. According to the Lesotho Bureau of Statistics, in 2001 life expectancy was estimated at 48 years for men and 56 years for women. Recent statistics estimate this now to be about 38 years for men and women, leaving many young children without their parents and left to fend for themselves.

GOOD TIMES: The lives of Helen O'Malley and Colette O'Sullivan have been radically changed by an experience during a charity trek in South Vietnam.

