

Young GUNS

Chance encounters have helped inspire our graduates and students to help make the world a better place. We discover the life-changing initiatives led by some outstanding alumni.

Words Dani Cooper

Images Chris Stacey, Dave Everett, Sarah Garnett and Susanna Matters

IT IS THE LITTLE THINGS THAT MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE. THAT'S WHAT SUSANNA MATTERS DISCOVERED ON HER EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY FROM AN UNDERGRADUATE TO FOUNDER OF AN INTERNATIONAL CHARITY.

It is an epiphany shared by other alumni who have also gone into the world as forces for lasting change: a chance encounter with a homeless man who loved to read has grown into a national organisation that supplies books to homeless people; a three-month working holiday in Africa was the launching pad for an international educational foundation; and an HSC encounter with Aboriginal studies has led to a passion to improve rural access to health.

For Matters (BA/Dip Ed, 2013), who studied teaching, her 'moment' was realising it wasn't her teaching, but rather monthly menstrual periods that made her female students at a Kenyan village miss school.

"I was shocked," Matters recalls. "I had heard about this issue but had never considered I would encounter it in my own travels."

The issue is not confined to Muhaka village in Kenya, where Matters was based. In developing nations the onset of menses often means the end of education due to factors ranging from cultural to a lack of hygienic sanitary products, with UNICEF estimating that one in 10 menstruating African girls skip school each month or drop out completely.

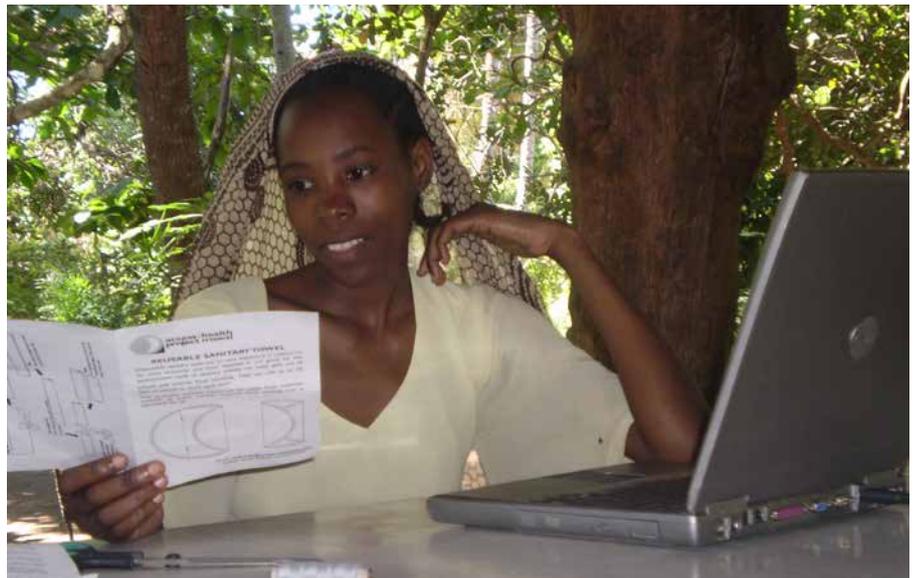
Matters organised a shipment of disposable pads for the Muhaka school. "This donation was considered so precious and exciting that the pads were locked away and issued as needed," she recalls. "The smiles on the girls' faces as they held a packet of pads was a powerful and emotional moment."

However, she soon realised her donation was no solution at all. "I couldn't keep being the tooth fairy of sanitary pads forever," she told the *Australian Women's Weekly* last year after being named among its Women of the Future.

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"It's not a glamorous issue, but it's also one that isn't going away. I couldn't turn my back on my students and I thought, If I don't do something about it, who will?". And so in January 2012 Goods for Girls was born. The charity not only teaches



● Since Goods for Girls began, school attendance has soared, while the village women who make the pads have an income for the first time.



● Goods for Girls founder Susanna Matters says that the smiles on the girls' faces as they first held a packet of pads was a powerful and emotional moment.

● Over four years Dave Everett says local staff in Katuuso School, Uganda, have taken ownership of the school so that it no longer feels 'white man-led'.



local women to make rewashable sanitary pads, it also undertakes hygiene training around women's health and distributes the sanitary pads. Since the project started, 86 per cent of village girls choose to use the rewashable pads and school attendance has soared, with a 44 per cent increase in the number of girls attending every day.

"My involvement with Goods for Girls is a daily reminder that it is small, simple things that have the greatest long-term impact," Matters says.

"We're not doing anything glamorous or very costly and we are using basic technology, but we are seeing improvements in young women's self-esteem, living standards, health and education."

The work has also had a lasting impact on the community as a whole. The village's women who make the pads earn a modest income – for many their first – which has allowed them to buy mobile phones to communicate with family far away.

“
I'm not going to die if I don't have a book, but it's amazing to have the choice to take one home, to get something that I don't necessarily need, but in an odd kind of way everyone needs.
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More importantly they have re-invested their earnings into vocational education such as computer workshops, tailoring classes, and internships at the local dispensary.

"These women have become breadwinners and role models," Matters points out.

Like Matters, Dave Everett OAM (BA (Development Studies and Culture Change), 2010) found his calling during a 2007 volunteer exchange to Kenya.

"The trip was meant to be for three months and it turned into a year," he recalls. "I really loved the work and after that year I came back to Australia and changed my degree to development studies."

While completing his degree, Everett and Annabelle Chauncy, a Sydney student he met in Africa, launched the School for Life Foundation. Both then aged just 21 years, they raised more than \$1.6 million, developed a partnership with Rotary, gathered a Board of Directors and negotiated with the Ugandan Government to make their vision a reality.

Everett says they were driven by a deep belief in the power of education to change communities – and the results to date have borne that out. Based in the village of Katuuso, about 1.5 hours drive from the Ugandan capital of Kampala, the foundation has built a primary school and is slowly growing its intake – currently around 320 students – while it completes a secondary school nearby.



● The Footpath Library gives away 3000 books a month through shelters, refuges and mobile services.

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For many of us, university was our first taste of independence – and as students, that freedom came without the high financial barriers that many face today. Everything is different for current students, but what hasn't changed is Macquarie's commitment to giving students who face hardship the education they deserve.

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For many students, a scholarship alleviates the need to make difficult choices, such as whether to work extra hours during a scheduled lecture in order to pay for living expenses. For some students, it is the single factor that ensures they are able to attend university in the first place.

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And while infrastructure is important, Everett says their approach emphasises quality education rather than simply churning students through. "In Uganda only 10 per cent of kids in Year 4 can read at Year 3 level," he says. "In our school that number is 92 per cent."

Everett can relate to Matters' experience of their work having unexpected outcomes. In Katuuso, school teachers have become community mentors, there is increased respect for children's rights and villagers are showing growing pride in their community through improvements to their homes.

However, it was being brought into line by his staff that gave Everett, who was last year awarded an Order of Australia, the greatest pleasure. "When we first started there was a lot of 'yes sirs, no sirs' and it all felt very much white-man led," he reveals. "But over four years the staff have become more empowered and have a lot of ownership over the school and they will actually yell at me now – that is where a lot of my pride comes from, that it is no longer just an idea of ours, but rather a school run by Ugandan staff."

Current Macquarie Bachelor of Speech and Hearing Sciences student Ashlee Jaensch has also taken the approach that age should be no barrier. Recently named Ku-ring-gai's Young Citizen of the Year, she has thrown herself into the vexed issue of rural health practitioner shortages. An active member of the Rural Students Health Network she travels across the state promoting rural health careers and inspiring young people,

especially from Indigenous communities, to think about a health career in remote Australia. It is a passion that was born out of her own experiences growing up in regional South Australia and an interest in Indigenous issues sparked by her HSC studies.

Fellow undergraduate Sarah Garnett, who is studying a Bachelor of Arts majoring in Anthropology, found a niche closer to home. After the death of a family friend, she channelled her grief into working with a food van for homeless people in Sydney. One night she encountered a man sitting under a streetlight reading while waiting his turn at the van. She began bringing him books and from this The Footpath Library was born.

Today, The Footpath Library has branches in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth and gives away 3000 books a month via libraries installed in shelters and refuges, and mobile services that take food for the mind and soul directly to the streets.

One of its clients is Grahame, a woman who spent 10 years without a home, who reflects: "I'm not going to die if I don't have a book, but it's amazing to have the choice to take one home, to get something that I don't necessarily need, but in an odd kind of way everyone needs."

The simple act of receiving a book reignited her passion for learning and prompted her to go back to school to complete her HSC. Grahame is now contemplating university and a career as an academic. "I feel like I have a future now," she says. 📖



● Ashlee Jaensch and Sarah Garnett balance their inspiring work with study at Macquarie.