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Saving my own life

250 rupees well spent

Initiatives of Change is a worldwide movement of people of diverse cultures and backgrounds who are committed to the transformation of society through changes in human motives and behaviour, starting in their own lives.

We work to inspire, equip and connect people to address world needs in the areas of trust building, ethical leadership and sustainable living.

In the UK, Initiatives of Change is a registered charity No. 226334 (England and Wales).
From the Editors

At a time of rising youth violence, climate change and political uncertainty, this issue of Changemakers showcases stories of youth leadership, resilience and activism.

They include a family who are promoting sport as a way of overcoming the stigma of disability (p4) and a former boxer who is using it to reshape the life chances of young people at risk of knife crime (p8); and an ex-offender (p12) and a former drug user (p24) who work, both inside prisons and in the community, to help young people turn their lives around.

In Myanmar, Bremley Lyngdoh (p14) is racing against time to restore mangrove forests and fight climate change, while, in Mexico, Jose Carlos Leon Vargas (p20) tells how the communities living around a huge rubbish tip are improving both their environment and opportunities.

Others featured in this issue are getting young people out to vote (p6), blazing a trail in politics (p22) and the police (p18), and demonstrating that Asia’s health needs can be met without corruption (p26).

These stories are a testament to the power of change which starts with oneself. They offer hope of a brighter future ahead – and of a new generation’s role in creating it.

For more stories of change, and to subscribe to receive updates, visit our website: www.changemakersmagazine.org

Federica Dadone and Yee-Liu Williams
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limitations in cognitive functioning and such life skills as communication, social relations and self-care. Jorge also has ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). ‘He had so much energy and we needed to find how best to channel it,’ explains Maite. The family’s challenge was to ‘look at what he could do rather than what he couldn’t do’. Sport was where he found joy, but there was nowhere that he and other children with special needs could develop their skills.

Jorge’s parents are members of CADI – a community-driven association of families whose children have ‘functional diversity’ or special needs. The association works tirelessly to raise awareness of the power of Adaptive Sports. Making sport accessible to anyone with special needs takes ‘a lot of work and a lot of heart’, says Maite. ‘Some people can and they won’t; some people want but they can’t – but we can and we want.’

In 2013, Jorge’s parents approached their local swimming club in Marbella to ask for a section for swimmers with special needs. It started with just one member, Jorge! Today it has over 20.

‘At first I thought I was just giving Jorge the opportunity to practise,’ says local swimming instructor

Lucy Patterson and Amanda Clements see living proof of the power of sport to transform lives.

Jorge Otalecu, 23, stretches out his hand to help fellow crew member, Álvaro Ramos, aboard the Aldebaran. The two sportsmen from Marbella, Spain, are hoping to make history this August as part of a special crew of mixed disabilities competing in the prestigious Copa del Rey de Vela international sailing race. ‘It is an opportunity to open doors as they will compete on equal terms with the rest of the racing field,’ says Jorge’s father, Alex Otalecu.

‘The challenge was to look at what he could do, rather than what he couldn’t.’

Everyday tasks might be a struggle for Jorge but when it comes to swimming, surfing, sailing, skiing, cycling he is unstoppable, beams his mother, Maite Caño. Jorge has an intellectual disability (ID), the most common, and most often overlooked, developmental disability. The term is used when a person has

Strong like Jorge
Alberto Alvares. ‘But very quickly I realised that he and his friends were talented swimmers and could go further.’ The swimming team trains at weekends and competes in local and national competitions. ‘Swimming helps them to control their emotions, to improve their self-esteem and to integrate as part of a group.’

‘There are no limits to doing something you love.’

It’s not only at water sports that Jorge excels. His father, who is an Alpine ski instructor, taught him to ski from a young age and in 2017 he won bronze in the Nordic skiing event at the Special Olympics in Austria. He represented Spain in the INAS World Ski Championships in France earlier this year and plans to compete in the Special Olympics 2021 in New Zealand. Jorge and his parents have met Tim Shriver, Chairman of Special Olympics International, and work as sports ambassadors championing social inclusion.

Jorge is currently studying Cultural Environments at Malaga University. Maite explains that this special course is an example of inclusive post-secondary education, designed to encourage young people with intellectual or developmental disabilities into higher education and future work. At the recent World Economic Forum it was stated that people with disabilities ‘have much to offer society and indeed the economy, yet remain the most marginalised group of people in the world’.

Recently, Jorge and other swimmers from the Marbella Swim Club have been visiting local schools to share their personal stories. ‘They are living proof of how to overcome barriers,’ says Maite. ‘They teach the lessons that are so important today; empathy, resilience, grit and character.’

On the sand dunes, every Saturday morning, you will find CADI families, looking out to sea, watching their children laughing, squealing with joy and surfing. Alex and Maite are there too, watching as Jorge helps young surfers ride the waves.

One of them is Nikko, the son of CADI’s President, Karina Milici. He has cerebral palsy. Before he began surfing, he could barely move his neck. ‘The transformation is astonishing,’ says Karina. ‘He is now able to stand, surf (with assistance) and move around more freely. And emotionally too – he is happy. Nikko taught me so much: there are no limits to doing something you love.’

‘I hear them say “I want to be as strong as Jorge” and it brings tears to my eyes,’ says Maite. She admits that she used to be over-protective and apprehensive about how he would cope outside the family bubble. But he has thrived. The children look up to him and are inspired by all he has accomplished. They want to be just like him.
Inspiring young voters

Law student Hanine Al-Nassar doesn’t care who you vote for, as long as you vote. Irene de Pous finds out more.

It was no small issue that Dutch law student Hanine Al-Nassar brooded upon in 2017. Why did only 18 per cent of young Dutch vote in the last European elections? How could this be changed? Or rather: ‘What can I do to change this?’ She had just participated in a training programme at the Caux Forum, organised by Initiatives of Change Switzerland, where she had also attended a conference on Europe. ‘Immediately afterwards I started talking with everybody about my questions.’

Eighteen months later, Hanine (22) and her foundation, Voortegen (ForAgainst), were in the frontline of the struggle to convince young people to vote in May’s European elections. The foundation organises debates between youth organisations across the whole political spectrum. In collaboration with ProDemos, the Dutch national institute for political education and information, they have developed a digital tool to test young people’s political preferences. ‘I don’t care how young people vote, as long as they vote and know why they voted for that party,’ says Hanine.

ProDemos’s research discovered that lack of knowledge is one reason for low turnout. ‘If you ask people why they do not go to the polls, it is often because they do not know what the differences between the parties are,’ says Eddy Habben Jansen, director of ProDemos, in the Dutch newspaper Metro. And the European Parliament feels ‘far away’ to many people. ‘We want people to step out of their information bubbles.’

Hanine has had a concern for the world since she was young. At secondary school she volunteered for Greenpeace and was a youth ambassador for the One Foundation, which combats world poverty. ‘I am an active person,’ she says. ‘I always want to get something done as quickly as possible.’ She applied for the Young Ambassadors Programme at Caux because she wanted to find out what young people from other countries thought about Europe.

When she got to Switzerland, the training programme turned out to be different from what she had expected. Yes, she got to exchange experiences with other young people. But space for reflection also formed part of the programme, and she found these daily times of silence difficult. ‘I wondered what we were doing. I am not used to standing still and had to shift down from third to first gear.’

At the end of her stay she talked about this with an older woman. ‘She said something like: life goes very fast, but sometimes you have to stand still, in order to be able to move forward again. I thought it was a paradox, but it began to make sense to me.’

She took this to heart when she got home, taking time to think about which issue, of all the ones she thought important, she wanted to dedicate herself to. ‘In conversations with a fellow student the idea arose to do something for the European elections.’

‘If I did this, I might be able to perform the next step.’

Her fellow student suggested working with groups that already existed, so they involved all the different political youth organisations. ‘This linked to the ideas from the Caux training programme about building bridges and connecting people,’ says Hanine. ‘Usually platforms are either pro or against Europe and other voices are not tolerated. We want people to step out of their information bubbles.’

When all voices are heard during a debate, she sometimes sees people changing their opinion. ‘It motivates me to see people base their choice on information instead of prejudice.’

Hanine has found the work personally enriching. ‘I talk to people of all political colours and this has made me open to the different views in society.’ Every new step increases her self-confidence. ‘Each time I think: if I did this, then I might also be able to perform the next step. When I approached ProDemos with our idea about a voting tool for young people, we were nothing yet, just some young people with an idea. I would never have expected that we would come this far.’

Does she have any tips for other young people who want to contribute to positive change? ‘It’s a cliché, but follow your dreams. If you really want something, you have to talk about it with everyone and ask for help. Don’t compare yourself too much with others. This is a disease of our social media generation. Focus on your own actions and keep going. You have the strength.’ Later on she adds: ‘And be patient, that is very important as well.’
Hanine Al-Nassar was a participant on the Young Ambassadors Programme at Caux Forum. For more information on the programme please visit: cauxforum.org
On the ropes

Mark Taylor urges young people to drop the knife and pick up the gloves. He talks to Lucy Patterson.

Mark Taylor doesn’t need the six-inch scar down his neck to remind him of the moment he was jumped from behind and stabbed six times. ‘It was my own naivety,’ he says, as he recalls his lapse of vigilance that day. ‘I should have known better.’

Now the Manager of Jimmy Egan’s Boxing Academy in Wythenshawe, Manchester, Mark has seen how boxing can change lives. ‘Wythenshawe is notorious for its gang crime,’ he says. The estate has been depicted in various TV documentaries as one of the most socially deprived areas in Britain. ‘Life isn’t easy for most young people growing up here.’

He speaks from experience. He grew up in Wythenshawe and, with no stable home life, had to fend for himself from the age of 13. He made roughly £200 a day from street crime.

It was while lying in hospital that Mark knew he needed to ‘break the cycle’ for the sake of his two sons. His wife, Lesley, has been his rock. They now work together using sport to reach out to young people and keep them off the streets.

As we drive through Manchester, Mark gives a knowing nod at the sight of a group of youths around a parked car. We discuss the national epidemic of knife crime. It is no longer just a gang-related thing, he maintains: ‘it is a complex web of turf warfare and the need for protection and belonging. Young people are desperate to defend themselves against bullies and gang leaders, and also see carrying a knife as a badge of honour and identity. Knives are preferred to guns because they carry a lesser sentence if the police catch you carrying one.’

Mark believes the root causes of knife crime have remained the same for generations: ‘poverty, domestic abuse, lack of education – you see it every day here’. Escaping the cycle is near impossible. ‘It is far more achievable for them to get the nice car, nice watch and trendy tracksuit by selling drugs on street corners than it
is by getting a legitimate job or going to university.’

Mark holds that boxing, when practised in a safe environment, offers the training, discipline and social skills needed to get on in life. ‘If you can hold your head above water in a boxing ring, I guarantee you can make it any walk of life,’ he says. ‘Local employers, looking to recruit hard-working committed young people, often approach me. Everyone knows how hard a boxer works.’

Egan’s Academy has produced 29 national champions and World Champion Tyson Fury. ‘Everyone who comes to the gym wants to be the best,’ says Mark. As we enter the Academy, young people are warming up with skipping ropes, proudly wearing their T-shirts and tracksuits.

I meet Courtney, 18, and Tracie, 34, from opposing gyms in the north and south of Manchester. To further their ambition to go professional, their trainers have arranged a number of sparring events.

‘People think boxing is dangerous but it’s not,’ Courtney explains. ‘The training helps you to be stronger.’ Both women agree that without boxing their lives would be completely different. ‘I would probably have been an addict, in prison or dead somewhere,’ says Tracie. ‘My life was going the wrong way.’ As leading women boxers, they support each other at fights, subverting the traditional enmity between Manchester’s north and south sides.

In recent months, Egan’s Academy arranged for a team of Cuban boxers to fight at the Forum Centre in Wythenshawe. Mark describes Cuban boxing as the ‘pinnacle of amateur boxing’. For the ‘cheeky’ young Mancunian lads, it was a painful defeat, but a good chance to learn how to deal with losing and what it takes to be world champion.

‘We give them hope and aspirations.’

Mark compares the sense of belonging and pull of boxing to that of a gang. ‘Most of these kids who come through our door are broken in some way. But they see they can achieve greatness if they work hard for it. We give them hope and aspirations – something to believe in and fight for. We say “Drop the knives and pick up the boxing gloves.”’ The volunteer team of coaches and mentors works every spare moment to keep young people off the streets and away from gang life.

Mark sees boxing as a way to build trust and relationships through respect ‘for one’s self, one’s sport and one’s opponent’. Finley, 11, turns up every week with his dad. Asked why he boxes, he replies, ‘When people start messing with you, you know how to defend yourself.’
Jimmy Egan's boxing academy urges young people to #dropteknife and to pick up the gloves.

The gym offers a safe environment for local youth at risk of being drawn into knife crime and gang activity.

The academy, with its team of trainers and mentors, is well known in Wythenshawe. Membership is open to all faiths and backgrounds. Members follow a tough training regime of discipline, dedication and respect for each other inside and outside the boxing ring.
#Droptheknife

campaign promotes boxing as a positive solution to the rising knife crime epidemic. It keeps young people off the streets and can save and change lives.

Initiatives of Change UK encourages this transformative inner-city youth initiative as part of its community outreach trustbuilding programme in Manchester.

Find them on Facebook: @jimmyegansboxingacademy

Watch *In The Ring* on Youtube: bit.ly/2HjXUjz
Hit the road, Jack

Jonathan Ranger finds out what brought Dwayne Jack back to prison.

At age 29, Dwayne Jack was discharged from prison for the last time. The officers waved him off with ‘Hit the road, Jack, and don’t you come back no more’. But he did come back, though not as a prisoner: Dwayne now works with young offenders, helping them find a new path, as he has done.

As a child, Dwayne frequently witnessed domestic violence within his home and experienced the trauma of later watching his mother being sentenced in court and taken away. He and his two younger sisters were taken by social services.

Without parental guidance, Dwayne slid from being a ‘troubled child’ to ‘a known troublemaker’. From six years old, he was involved in crime, theft, burglary and robberies with older boys. By 13 he was numbing his traumas with crack cocaine.

‘I was a complete menace to society,’ he admits. ‘At 13, I got my first detention training order (DTO), and by 15 I was in Feltham Young Offenders Institution.’ He recalls the graffiti message on his cell wall: ‘If you smoke crack, you’ll be back; if you think I’m joking, keep on smoking’. For 17 years, he was in and out of prison.

Dwayne bears the scars of gunshot wounds, stabbings and a machete to his head. He was paralyzed down his left side and had several near-death experiences. But the hidden mental trauma went even deeper. He remembers waking up in a seedy hotel room, ‘crying in total despair’, after sniffing cocaine with prostitutes the night before. ‘I’d hit rock bottom,’ he says, ‘the dark night of the soul.’ He was desperate to return to the ‘safe haven’ of prison.

Things were so bad that his girlfriend, Mel, wouldn’t come near him. When they first got together, ‘it was like two shooting stars colliding’. They had both had dysfunctional childhoods, and the pattern repeated. Mel was forced into prostitution at gunpoint in her teens, and became a high-end cocaine dealer.

‘I was a complete menace to society.’

Photo: Tuko Gurirab
Back in prison, now aged 27, Dwayne experienced a ‘powerful spiritual awakening’ in which he surrendered to God. ‘During one night, it was like I was vibrating from head to toe, my whole body filled with pure light,’ he says. From that moment his life changed. ‘Next day I gave my TV back, changed the way I walked and talked, and took up meditation, tapping into my higher self and connecting with the universe. I read the Bible. I was literally the happiest person in the prison.’

Dwayne started inspiring other prisoners. He ran meditation workshops. He created a ‘therapeutic urban intervention programme’ based on his experiences and childhood trauma, which he calls Hit the Road, Jack! When he was released, he set up a business, RoadLight Ltd, to run it.

The course, which is accredited by the Open College Network (OCN), includes a mentoring scheme, with shadowing and employment after prison. ‘It deals with forgiveness of self and others, communication, awareness, identity, relationships, attitude, citizenship, exploitation, weapons and violence,’ he explains.

Roadlight targets schools, colleges and universities with its early-intervention programme. ‘We work within the criminal justice system, to identify potential trouble and prevent offending, rather than just trying to cure it. We help young people engage with the feelings and experiences that drive them onto the dark road of alcohol, drugs, crime, sex. Whatever it is, they are doing it to fill the void.’

Dwayne is a sought-after life-coach and motivational speaker, living the life he advocates. When Mel visited Dwayne in prison, he told her that he could not be in a relationship with her if she went on selling drugs. ‘Fortunately she chose me. We realised God had put us together for a reason.’ Mel has now been baptised and they are married. Today they work together at Feltham and other prisons and probation services up and down the country.

‘We’re launching a community interest company in partnership with police, local councils and support groups, Youth For Action and other charities.’ Dwayne has devised a free online training package – Killing the Gangster Within – to help young people on the edge of criminality take a step back.

‘Forgiving allowed me to love and be loved.’

He speaks of his step-brother and childhood best friend, Darren Casey, with whom ‘we were bad boys together’. He has been on a similar journey of change to Dwayne. ‘He’s waiting to come out of prison to work with us and is already helping other prisoners.’ Young offenders don’t respond to ‘fluffy duffy’, he says, but they will listen to people who have been through the chaos they are experiencing.

Forgiveness – of self and others – is central to Dwayne and Mel’s work. ‘I forgave my mother – it finally allowed me to love and be loved,’ he says. ‘She’s now a Christian too.’

He describes ‘not forgiving’ as being like a bird, which has oil on its wings and cannot fly. Whatever trauma you have suffered, forgiving ‘will set you free’.
Manna from heaven

Why did Dr Bremley Lyngdoh look to the skies to save Myanmar’s mangrove forests? Yee-Liu Williams finds out.

When Bremley Lyngdoh attended the Vatican in October 2017, it was as a winner of the inaugural BridgeBuilder Challenge, inspired by Pope Francis’s challenge to youth leaders to build bridges. As an 18-year-old, dreaming of aviating the skies and exploring outer space, he joined the air cadets flying with the Delhi No 1 Air Squadron of the Indian Air Force. Now 44, his life has been more down to earth, but he still looks to the skies, using drones and planetary technology to ‘heal the soil for the farmers on earth’.

The BridgeBuilder Challenge awards $1 million a year in prize money for ideas with global impact. Bremley’s proposal to use tree-planting drones to restore mangrove forests and protect livelihoods in Myanmar won a grant of $250K. The bid was a strategic partnership between Worldview Impact Foundation (WIF) in London and BioCarbon Engineering (BCE) based in Oxford. Bremley and Dr Irina Fedorenko, of BioCarbon Engineering, are part of a team organizing the Caux Dialogue on Land and Security at the Caux Forum 2019.

This is the first time that drones have been used to ‘fire seedpods from the sky to restore mangrove ecosystems’, Bremley says. The technology has the potential to fire over 7,000 seedpods an hour – ‘manna from heaven’ to help restore degraded land and communities impacted by environmental disaster.

Mangroves absorb CO₂ emissions, protect vulnerable coastal communities from extreme weather and are a vital foundation for marine life, sustaining not only fisheries but many other forms of wildlife. Since 1980, a million hectares of mangroves have been cut down in Myanmar. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, this loss contributed to the devastation wreaked by Cyclone Nargis in 2008, when more than
140,000 people lost their lives and 800,000 were displaced. ‘It is so easy to destroy ecosystems but very hard to restore them,’ Bremley states.

Bremley’s quest is to fight climate change by planting one billion mangrove trees in the next 20 years. Sixty per cent of villagers in Myanmar’s Irrawaddy Delta don’t have permanent jobs and cut down mangrove trees for their livelihood, he says. The region is known as the ‘rice bowl’. Rates of deforestation here are three to five times higher than the global average, according to WIF. To date, local teams have planted six million trees. The task is painstakingly slow and Bremley fears it is a race against time before the next cyclone hits.

‘A quest to fight climate change by planting a billion mangrove trees’

Bremley travels extensively as an international speaker on climate change, future technology, land security and social enterprise. He describes himself as a global citizen and nomad. He grew up in Shillong, capital of the North East Indian state of Meghalaya, which gained independence from Assam two years before he was born. The state, whose name is Sanskrit for ‘where the clouds come home’, is mountainous and its forests are among the richest botanical habitats in Asia.

Bremley’s father EB Lyngdoh was part of the core team of community and political leaders who negotiated for Meghalaya’s separation from Assam through ‘non-violent direct action’. ‘Not a single drop of blood was shed,’ he recalls proudly. He acknowledges the role of IofC (then Moral Re-Armament) in the reconciliation between rival leaders that made this possible.

He quotes his father as saying: ‘A tree with no roots withers away in the lightest breeze and it bears no fruits.’ He believes each person needs to find their roots and purpose and says that ‘taking care of trees is in my blood’. Every clan in Meghalaya once had a ‘sacred forest’, where they worshipped the Creator.

Meghalayan culture is matrilineal, with daughters inheriting the land and taking on the mother’s family name. ‘It is the girl child that is blessed,’ he says. ‘What I’m trying to do is protect what we still have and regenerate for every family what they had a long time ago.’

Bremley has recently launched Spring Valley Farm in India, an initiative that looks to educate young people on ancient agri-architectural concepts. Using drones to plant trees is just one way of connecting ‘environmental observation to agri-tech innovation’ in the cause of global sustainability, he says.

Bremley urges each one of us to take action to fight climate change. In the UK, each person generates 10 tons of CO₂ emissions each year. If every person, wherever they lived in the world, planted a tree every year, that would neutralize their carbon footprint. He maintains that if we don’t take action over the next decade to reverse the damage to ecosystems, there will be no planet for our children to inherit.

For more information on the Caux Dialogue on Land and Security, visit cauxforum.org
Mangrove Deforestation

The world’s mangrove forests are disappearing at three to four times the rate of global deforestation, according to Worldview Impact Foundation. We are losing them faster than inland tropical rain forests. Only about half are left.

Mangroves are significant to the functioning of the natural environment worldwide. They are critically important to the diversity of marine life, supporting many endangered species such as manatees and sea turtles.

In Myanmar’s coastal regions, the roots of mangroves dissipate the force of tides and buffer the land against erosion caused by sea level rise, storm surges, hurricanes and tsunamis.
Mangroves combat climate change

A thriving mangrove ecosystem can store two to five times more carbon than most other tropical forests.

One mangrove tree absorbs one ton of CO\(_2\) over 20 years. This reduces planet-warming gases in the atmosphere.

#PLANTATREE

Take action to restore our forests and help to reverse global climate change by planting a tree.

Worldview Impact Foundation: worldviewimpact.org

BioCarbon Engineering: biocarbonengineering.com
What is Sakira doing in the police?

Sakira Suzia is not your stereotypical police officer. She talked to Pam Jenner.

Sakira Suzia was just 15 years old when she and her twin sister were beaten up by a white woman in an East London street as they walked home from school. When Sakira’s elder sister took them to the police station, the white officer refused to report the incident.

‘He told us it was normal for people in our community to be involved in incidents like this and we should get used to it,’ said Sakira, who is a Muslim of Bangladeshi origin.

‘I was so angry. I told him, “How dare you. You watch, when I grow up I’m going to be a police officer. No one deserves to be attacked, regardless of what their background is or where they are from.”’

Ten years ago Sakira, 34, kept her promise and joined the Metropolitan Police. She now plays a major role within her community, building trust in the force and working with young people on a restorative justice programme in Islington, where knife crime is rife.

Although violence is increasing, particularly amongst the young, Sakira is convinced that there is hope for the future.

‘I definitely think people can change,’ she said. ‘People are not born criminals; there is humanity in everyone. People are not born evil, it’s learnt.’

As a young child, Sakira lived with her parents, four sisters and brother in Tower Hamlets where the far-right British National Party had a high profile. She said: ‘We were very scared to play in front of the flats, but it felt wrong to be scared.’

When she was 11, her family moved to Newham.
Although it was slightly more diverse, it was not much safer and it was there that Sakira and her sister were attacked.

Sakira’s interest in the police grew when she studied criminology and psychology at Westminster University. At the same time, she joined the Officer Training Corps of the Territorial Army (TA).

‘The TA was populated mainly by white, private school, rugby-playing men,’ she said. ‘I didn’t fit in. I found the Islamaphobia a challenge, however it drove me to learn more about my religion and culture.’

She was aware that the police force also lacked diversity: ‘If you are black, ethnic and join the police you will be seen as a traitor. I didn’t tell the people from my community that I had joined. It’s not something they would have accepted and it could have brought danger to my family.’

Fortunately, however, attitudes are changing: ‘Young Asian boys still think I’m a traitor, but the older ones feel proud of me.’

‘You watch, when I grow up I’m going to be a police officer.’

Her career in the police has certainly been eventful. In 2011 she was on the frontline during the Tottenham riots, but the following year walked through those same streets escorting the Olympic torch relay team.

Because she understands and is trusted by ethnic minority communities, Sakira puts herself forward to deal with terrorist incidents such as last year’s Finsbury Park mosque attack.

‘It upsets me that the Finsbury Park community has been the victim of attacks for years but has never reported them,’ she said. ‘Muslim women are frightened to go out but we have now devised a way for them to talk to me so that we can help them.’

‘People are not born criminals.’

Sakira believes in restorative justice and, with the help of Initiatives of Change’s Women, Leadership and Sustainable Change programme, has researched projects involving young offenders in South Africa and the United States, writing a report for the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust.

Today she is part of the Youth Offending Team in Islington, working with gang members to ensure they stay away from courts and the prison system. Projects include setting up clubs where young people can learn a skill, such as boxing or martial arts, and help to combat their anger.

She is not only interested in helping people in the UK. In 2016 she and one of her sisters went to Greece to help Syrian refugees. Along with fellow aid workers she formed a group called Insaaf, which is Arabic for justice, and this year it became a charity, providing refugees with food, clothes and shelter.

Recently Sakira took part in a half marathon in Bethlehem, running alongside three of her sisters to raise money for Palestinian orphans.

‘We all have a responsibility to help each other,’ she said. ‘I do this in the police but I don’t want to be stuck in one place. We are all different for a reason and if we don’t challenge ourselves and put ourselves out there, we won’t ever learn.’
Hope on the landfill

For 10 years, José Carlos León Vargas has been working alongside the people who live around a huge rubbish tip in southern Mexico. He writes:

I was born and raised in Oaxaca, the second poorest state in Mexico. Seventy per cent of its population struggle under the poverty line. In Oaxaca City, 18,000 people live in 33 informal settlements around a huge landfill site, where up to 300 trucks dump 1,000 tons of rubbish every day. They have come from all over the state in search of employment. Most work in badly paid or informal jobs in the city, but about 200 make a living by sorting waste by hand and selling the recyclable materials.

I studied in Mexico City and overseas, and returned to Oaxaca in 2008 with my wife, Aurelia, who is Italian. We knew that we wanted to create an organization to work with the poorest of the poor. As soon as I saw the landfill, I knew we had to start there. There were rivers of rubbish everywhere, homes made of recycled materials, little or no basic services. Society saw the people who lived there as filthy and violent.

I knew from the writings of the Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire, that having a Masters in international development did not mean I could bring solutions to the people. They knew better than me what needed to be done. So Aurelia and I spent eight months getting to know families, while we set up our charity, SiKanda. Its name means ‘movement and transformation’ in Mixtec, a local indigenous language.

“We registered SiKanda in 2009. At first we focused on the people sorting through the landfill. We initially taught them how to use earthworms to turn waste into compost for sale or for use in community gardens. Ten years on our focus has expanded to include preventing violence, empowering girls, helping mothers to set up businesses, and building classrooms, libraries (out of recycled bottles) and community kitchens for schools in the shanties around the landfill. Our projects now reach out to 5,000 people.

We are the only organization in southern Mexico which works consistently with people living around...
landfills. Many groups come here with toys and clothes for Christmas, Mother’s Day or Children’s Day. Then they leave. We were clear we wanted a long relationship and that helped us to gain people’s trust.

We met Vanessa when she was 12 and attending elementary school. At 14, she had already left middle school to join her mother and grandmother sorting rubbish on the landfill. She said school was boring and that she was bullied. In 2015 we helped build a computing classroom and library in the only community centre in the area, where school drop-outs could take afternoon classes. Vanessa finished her schooling there and then studied to become a hairdresser. She didn’t return to work on the tip.

Eleven-year-old María attends the Simbolos Patrios elementary school, just 10 metres over the street from the landfill. The kids there are exposed to all types of dust and pollution. Recently we helped to build them a community kitchen, which provides meals for over 200 children. On the day the kitchen opened, María told me that when she started school aged six she thought she would never have a proper lunch there. ‘Now,’ she said, ‘I am in the final grade and we have a canteen. I can enjoy it for a whole year and the younger kids will not have the same problems as I did.’

Children, and especially girls, are the most vulnerable to the effects of poverty, exclusion and stigma. We train girls, teachers, parents and the general public in violence prevention, gender issues, environmental leadership, sexual and reproductive rights. We do this through art, storytelling, sports and community gatherings. We also promote the use of bikes, which gives girls greater security and freedom.

We are now seeking to collaborate more closely with local, state and federal authorities and with other charities and civil society groups to improve public policies. This means reaching out to decision makers so that the state does its job in ensuring a sustainable livelihood for shanty dwellers.

‘We have to strip off our degrees and diplomas.’

In my 20s I worked for three years with Initiatives of Change (IoC) in Europe and Asia. One of the main things I took away from these years was the idea of congruence: being consistent and walking the talk, being a colleague rather than a leader, being someone who rolls up his sleeves and listens to others. As a person who does not follow a specific religion, IoC’s moral values help me to make decisions with heart and mind, and to treat others with respect and humbleness.

A solid academic background and work experience is important, but we have to strip off our degrees and diplomas when we talk to people. We are not working with beneficiaries but with collaborators. I remind myself every day that SiKanda is not my project. We are not the voice of the people in these communities: they already have one. We collaborate with them so that they can make their voices heard.
There is a right and a wrong

Civil servant turned politician, Siobhan Benita, talks to Francis Evans about democracy, fake news and a brighter future ahead.

We meet on a sunny morning, on the terrace of the Royal Festival Hall overlooking the Thames. Siobhan Benita, the Liberal Democrat candidate for London Mayor, is looking forward to a day’s campaigning in a by-election in Lambeth.

This will be Siobhan’s second mayoral run since she gave up her high-flying Civil Service career in 2012 to run as an independent. At the time of the decision she was a senior figure in the Department of Health. The new Secretary of State, Andrew Lansley, was proposing plans to fundamentally change the NHS. ‘For the first time in my career, the policy that I was being expected to implement hadn't been put to the public.’

When she joined the Civil Service, Siobhan knew that at some point it was likely that she would have to implement policies with which she did not personally agree, ‘but you’re doing it because that’s the democratic system’. This felt different: ‘The NHS reforms weren’t in the manifesto, they had kind of slipped in without anybody knowing. To me that was a real conflict of values and I didn’t want to be part of that system any longer.’

Leaving the Civil Service is not so unusual, but what Siobhan did next certainly was. Independent politics is a tough choice, with little financial or organisational support. What was her motivation?

‘So why are you not giving it a go yourself?’

‘Working so closely with ministers and seeing that system becoming increasingly dysfunctional worried me. You can sit back and go, “It’s so awful, I don’t want anything to do with it.” Or you can look at yourself. I thought: you have some experience, which could be useful. You’re always saying we need more women in public life. So why are you not giving it a go yourself?’

As a Civil Servant, Siobhan was barred from party political activity. That meant standing as an independent was the natural option, although she recalls many
obstacles. Having demonstrated the same level of support (and put up the same deposit) as a party candidate, she was not entitled to the same media coverage or party political broadcasts.

She remains convinced that strong, independent candidates are valuable in bringing different perspectives. Even so, on the morning of the referendum result she joined the Liberal Democrats. ‘It was a realisation that everybody who shares pro-European and global values should be working together.’

The conversation turns to Brexit and the impact it has had on the country. I suggest that the remain side is seen as either patronising or blaming those who voted to leave. What can we do as individuals to get away from the perception that one side must be right and the other wrong?

Siobhan is not convinced: ‘I do think there are some issues where there is a right and a wrong.’ She recalls a speech by Barack Obama in South Africa the previous year, in which he said, ‘The denial of facts runs counter to democracy. It could be its undoing. Too much of politics today seems to reject the very concept of objective truth.’

‘What we can all do,’ says Siobhan, ‘is remember that the tone and language we use are hugely important. We’ve allowed and normalised words like “traitor” that should never be thrown around lightly. We need to be more cautious about the things we share online. For example, the evidence shows that the more you share images of knives online, the more young people get scared. Then a 14-year-old boy, who has never picked up a knife in his life, goes, “Oh, my God, everybody else on my estate is walking around carrying one of those, I really need to pick one up.”’

This leads on to the aggression that women MPs have faced recently. ‘The good thing is they are calling it out,’ says Siobhan. ‘They’re not accepting it any more. Women politicians will flag up the abuse they get and will prosecute. So, hopefully, we’re going through a time where it’s all being brought out in the open, and once we get through that it will get better.’

Siobhan sees a link between attacks on female politicians and the national mood. On the morning of the referendum result you could already see there was going to be conflict. Once you unleash that kind of divide, and give a platform to the populist far-right, ‘you can’t easily put it back in the box’. They’re never going to be happy because no outcome will ever be extreme enough, she adds.

‘We need to be more cautious about the things we share online.’

‘I think what we’re seeing at the moment is a last-gasp attempt to cling onto control by people who are scared of a future where there’s diversity, where many of the old ways will be irrelevant. We just need to keep up our resilience and show some stamina, and we will get there.’

She is convinced of a brighter future ahead: ‘We have a smart public who can see through fake news, the attempts to feed people’s insecurities and worries. So many young people now are forcing change, forcing public leaders and politicians to take note. I don’t think our politicians (and I include myself) have yet understood the completely different way in which young people view the world. They give me hope.’
Psychology coach and trainer Ricky Gill has been to most of the dark places the mind can take you to. He talks to Federica Dadone.

Ricky Gill describes his life as a ‘long-running battle’ of overcoming fear: ‘feel it, move towards it, approach it, see how it attempts to seduce you and learn to overcome it’.

He started this battle early, as the son of hard-working immigrants from Punjab living in a tough London neighbourhood. He describes his school as a ‘war zone’. His parents, who were trying to create economic stability, were unable to see the dangerous social influences at play. To survive, he adapted, charming the older gang leaders in the area so as to gain acceptance. ‘To act like I wasn’t afraid was terrifying,’ he says.

By the age of 13, Ricky had created a gang with his best friend. ‘My life turned from innocent kid playing football – my first love, the first place where I felt a sense of belonging – to a really deviant and violent subculture, pretty much overnight. I am the perfect example of a child who, if I grew up in a different environment, would be a completely different person.’ When he left school, he got in with an even more dangerous gang, and developed a serious drugs and alcohol addiction.

Looking back, he says that young people join gangs because they are looking for power, belonging and significance. ‘I knew I was more than that, but I was completely trapped.’ At college, he pretended to study. ‘I wanted to be a diplomat. There was a part of me that loved studying and learning, and it nearly killed me. The agony of knowing that you’re not being who you might be is crushing for the soul.’

‘I can’t ever go back to being dead.’

His lowest moment came when he could not face his final exams. He looked out of a bedsit window and saw ‘all the nice well-adjusted kids in my class’ sitting on a double decker bus, smiling happily. He disappeared on a seven-day bender with his best friend. As he walked home, filled with self-hatred, he checked himself in a car’s mirror. ‘I looked at my eyes and I was just dead. I just knew that I can’t live like this any more and I don’t want to die like this.’

Finally, he went into non-residential rehab, with the
help of his uncle. He did the programme three times. ‘In the first few weeks of rehab I learned more about what’s useful in life and what it means to be human than I had in the previous 19 years. It was an incredible education.’

His first breakthrough came from confronting people he owed money to, as well as those to whom he had caused harm. ‘I learned in therapy about having to be honest with people, and I did it.’ The second was knowing many of his associates were due to spend significant time in prison through their 20s. ‘It set me free,’ he says.

‘You have to walk into the forest on your own.’

The most difficult thing was walking away from his best friend, ‘using partner’ and fellow gang member, who became psychotic and spent time in prison after Ricky went into rehab. ‘I had to save my own life,’ he says. ‘I knew now that I’m alive, I can’t ever go back to being dead.’

Through recovery, and inspired by his therapists and counsellors, Ricky realised that he wanted to help young people. He returned to his ‘first love’, working as a football coach. He got every qualification he could, including training as a high ropes instructor, ‘because I’m terrified of heights’. He created his first company, New Adventure Learning.

At the same time, he studied NLP (neurolinguistics programming), which he found ‘completely transformative’. He ran groups at the rehab he had attended. ‘I’ve been to most of the dark places the mind can take you to, so I’m not afraid of anything a person shares,’ he says. ‘Working in those rehabs teaches you to be absolutely fearless and competent in what you’re doing.’

For the next 10 years, he studied intensively, while starting his own private practice. He also began to coach young professional football players and to teach NLP to the general public. He has developed his own ‘whole person’ coaching model, combining the things that have helped him over the last 20 years: NLP, Eriksonian hypnotherapy, interpersonal neurobiology, non-secular mindfulness and principles of worldwide philosophy.

When he met Pam, now his wife, they formed an instant bond. They now have two children.

Now almost 39, Ricky says his greatest achievement has been ‘learning to be a peaceful person’. ‘There comes a time in every young person’s life when they have got to walk their own path. As hard as it is, you have to be prepared to walk into the forest on your own.’

He returned to his ‘first love’, working as a football coach.
250 rupees well spent

Born in poverty, Suresh Vazarani set out to transform healthcare in India. The new President of Initiatives of Change International talks to Mary Lean.

Suresh Vazarani is the founder and Managing Director of Transasia, India’s largest medical diagnostics company, which employs 1,500 people, a third of them outside India. Last year he became the President of Initiatives of Change (IoC) International.

The two roles are linked. The values of honesty and service which drive Transasia stem from decisions Suresh made in his 20s, when he worked for nine years with IoC.

When Suresh founded the company in 1979 he had just 250 rupees in his pocket and a huge vision in his heart: to transform healthcare in Asia and to do this with integrity. From day one, he refused to pay bribes – risking contracts and spending thousands on court cases. He insists on paying his taxes in full, in spite of blandishments from tax agents hoping for a rake-off.

Born in a refugee camp in Nagpur, to parents who had fled Karachi at the time of Partition in 1947, Suresh only realised he was poor when he went to university. He and his six siblings had grown up in a two-room house, with communal toilets, and, for the first 10 years, no electricity or water.

When he saw how other people lived, he says, he became selfish. ‘I felt I had a right to do whatever I could to obtain things. Why should I pay for a book or a bus ticket? The world had everything and we had nothing.’

There was a great community spirit in the camp, where everyone had come from Karachi. Suresh joined a right-wing nationalist movement, drawn in by its youth activities, fellowship and idealism. ‘We talked of creating a new world, dominated by the values of Hinduism,’ he says. ‘Because our families had suffered in Pakistan, the camp was a strong breeding ground for anti-Muslim feelings.’

After graduation, he moved to Mumbai to work in a petrochemicals firm. There he encountered IoC. Its commitment to creating a better world based on moral values appealed to his idealism, while its emphasis on starting with oneself challenged him to look more closely at his own behaviour. ‘When I put things right, I began to feel that I was a part of the solution and not the problem,’ he says.

His plan was to go to the US to do his Masters and
make a career, like most of his generation of Indian engineers. Instead, in 1971 he decided to volunteer for a year on the building of Asia Plateau, IofC’s new conference centre in Panchgani. As he was a volunteer, he could not continue to help his family financially. His parents, supportive at first, grew more and more distressed as one year stretched into nine.

These years working alongside people of many nationalities, faiths and backgrounds stretched Suresh’s horizons and undermined his prejudices. They also gave him a belief that ‘following the still small voice inside us can help us become better human beings’.

In 1975 Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi placed the country under a state of emergency, curbing civil liberties and press freedom. This hit IofC’s news magazine, Himmat, edited by Rajmohan Gandhi, a grandson of the Mahatma. When he refused to submit to censorship, the government leaned on the printers. Soon no press would print the magazine.

Gandhi asked Suresh to find a solution in time to print the next week’s magazine. Thousands of readers responded to an appeal for donations, ‘but when we added it up it wasn’t so much’. He found a press, persuaded its seller to hand it over ahead of final payment, took over the operation and brought Himmat out on time.

Four years later, Suresh set up Transasia in the same ‘faith that where God guides, he provides’. He was convinced that the way to improve health in India was through prevention and early diagnosis. He points out that 70 per cent of treatment decisions around the world are based on blood tests: but that, even now, only 30 per cent of Indians have ever had their blood tested.

Transasia started out by importing and distributing blood analysers made overseas, but found that these expensive imported machines were beyond the reach of most Indian health providers. So they started to make them in India and sell them at affordable prices, exporting to over 100 developing countries.

What has he taken into business from IofC? First, he says, a strong belief in inner guidance. All his meetings end with two minutes of silent reflection and, according to the Financial Times, he considers this ‘a fundamental part of his company’s success’.

‘Business is a means of achieving a just and fair world.’

Secondly, IofC taught him to see challenges as opportunities: a mantra which has served him well in his battles against corruption. Is he never tempted to pay a bribe to speed things up? ‘I wouldn’t say I am never tempted,’ he replies, ‘but the temptation goes away the moment my inner voice reminds me that business is not an end for me, it is a means of achieving a just and fair world.’

He says that IofC’s values played a major role in Transasia’s success as a company which is ‘helping millions of Indians remain healthy’. He is now developing an Institute of Leadership at Asia Plateau, to train future leaders in values of service, integrity and responsibility.

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John Quincy Adams