

Making a difference is easier than you think

So maybe you will get a bonus next month. You might even get a pay rise. Perhaps you have savings left over, now that the markets have managed to survive 2009. How are you going to spend it? It is really not that hard to do something worthwhile, such as, say, saving lives. And you don't have to be a firefighter or a rescue helicopter pilot. Bankers, accountants, lawyers and just about everybody else can do it.

About six months ago I devoted this column to the subject of poverty. I wanted to draw attention to the massive economic disparities in the world and suggest that doing something is better than doing nothing.

Anyone who has travelled in Asia and has looked out of the window of the taxi has seen families living on the streets, shanty towns under gleaming office buildings, or tiny children begging for small change at the windows of Mercedes.

It might seem surprising for a banker to be writing on this. Bankers are all selfish, bonus-grabbing monsters, I have read somewhere. But to be honest, there aren't many bankers, or any other people, who do not want to help. No one is driving their BMW past the slum thinking, "Oh, I really wish I could ignore those people living on the side of the road, they really annoy me."

I work in a bank and I can afford to give a bit of what I earn to the folks who really need it. And so can anyone reading this newspaper. But the problems of this world are enormous. What am I actually supposed to do?

In Hong Kong, around the dinner table one day in 2007, a small group of friends came up with a simple answer: let's do something. They each contributed a bit of money and started helping out.

The first thing they did was fund a shelter for women and children in Laos who are victims of human trafficking and domestic violence. They also financed a vocational training centre in Vietnam. In June 2008, among other things, they provided funding to a girls' home in Qinghai (青海). In March last year, they gave money to a programme run by the Cambodian Acid Survivors Charity and then in October, began construction on a facility in Cambodia for victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation. They have undertaken 11 projects so far and are working on many more.

They are not members of the United Nations, they are not Oxfam

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or the Red Cross; they are just a bunch of Hong Kong professionals who felt like doing something worthwhile.

The focus of the organisation, called New Day, is women in Asia. The members meet regularly to go over projects and proposals. Most members simply contribute a small amount each month. Others who have the time and the interest examine proposals, manage projects or contribute whatever skills they have.

There were eight people around the table in March 2007 when New Day got started. The group has 64 members today.

One of New Day's beneficiaries is Serala, a 16-year-old in Pondicherry,



One of the girls helped by New Day.

southern India. Her mother was a sex worker who gave birth to Serala after being raped. During her early childhood, Serala lived on the streets with her mother.

After working as a house maid – a job she started when she was six – her mother sent her to Bangalore to work as a maid for a wealthy family. Suffering sexual abuse at her employer's place, she escaped to Pondicherry, where she lived alone on the streets. Like so many children who live on the streets, her chances of one day breaking her family's cycle of poverty were pretty slim. Sleeping on the pavement every night is particularly dangerous for a teenage girl. For Serala, however, there was a glimmer of hope. Last year New Day funded a night shelter in Pondicherry. They also funded an educational and vocational programme to help the girls regain confidence and learn valuable skills.

The night shelter and training programme are run in conjunction with a day centre set up with assistance from Hong Kong-based ADM Capital Foundation.

For Serala, the centres were an

opportunity to escape her life on the streets. Although frightened and withdrawn at first, Serala has, over the last year, been able to regain her confidence to the point where today she is an active participant in the running of the centres.

The cost of the night shelter for one year was HK\$150,000 and was funded by New Day with a donation from law firm Linklaters. New Day has also co-operated with law firm Norton Rose, which made a significant contribution to a Cambodian centre for victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Liza and Chris Green are the founding members of New Day. Chris is a banker at HSBC and Liza works full-time looking after her children and New Day.

Like so many expats living in Asia, from the moment they arrived here it was obvious to them that they were very lucky to have so many advantages. Talking to their friends who felt similarly was the natural next step. Through word of mouth and friends of friends, the group started to grow. New Day was born and the simple idea became a successful charity organisation.

Because of the relatively small size of New Day, its members can visit the projects they have helped. On a recent visit to a women's shelter in Cambodia, Liza met "a lovely girl with a pink clip". Just two days before, this girl's uncle had turned up at the shelter demanding that she be given back to him. He had come to return her to the brothel from which she had been rescued. They had to call the police.

There are many organisations like New Day. While some of them are run by aid or charity workers, many are run by readers of *Sunday Money*, ordinary people like us.

When I first wrote on charity, I had said standing around a burning building and lamenting the fact that you can only save one person is not as helpful a response as actually saving that one person. Much less a crowd of people standing around a burning building each lamenting the fact that they can only save one person each. Organisations like New Day are running into the building and doing what they can. Anyone standing around watching can see how easy it is.

For further information on New Day, please contact Liza Green at cgreen@netvigator.com or visit www.newdayasia.org

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