

“I Found My Destiny Among The Poorest”

A successful British civil engineer at the prime of his life found a massive void in his life. He found his destiny helping a remote mountainous community in East Bali that was living in abject poverty. *MillionaireAsia*'s **Brian Yim** took the very bumpy road to this vast village.



DAVID (EXTREME RIGHT) AND SENIOR STAFF WITH HAPPY PENGALUSAN CHILDREN, FEBRUARY 2006.

David Booth grew up in abject poverty in Morecambe, in the North West of England as his family struggled to feed three children. Through sheer grit and hard work, David managed to get a university education and graduated as a civil engineer.

He worked for United Kingdom's biggest construction company, Tarmac and was the youngest civil engineer at age 23, to be sent overseas to Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates. He accomplished his tasks well and at age 25, was again the youngest project manager in Nigeria to run one of the largest projects, the 150-mile Bama to Little Gombe Road project in northeast Nigeria.

David initiated transparent accounting systems, with no computers, and ensured that all of the people working on the project (over 1,000 Nigerians and up to 10 expatriates) knew that he would not tolerate any kind of corruption. He recalled: "It was very difficult in a country that was known as the most corrupt in the world at that time! I succeeded

largely because I treat everybody as an equal and realised that my success would only come if all of the people below me were correctly trained, knew the value of their work, were not overworked and enjoyed their job. I also initiated the first ever sickness benefits for workers' wives and children so they could focus on their work. In the bush, that was not easy!"

Nearly Killed

It takes a brave man to stand up to corruption and David nearly lost his life as project manager of a Nigerian-owned construction company when he instituted systems to eradicate corruption there.

"The key ringleader of the corrupt activities broke rules he had signed to and was terminated. When he came to collect his final wages and bonus etc, he and another recently fired corrupt employee tried to kill me. I escaped with a broken nose and six broken ribs. I was rescued by my security man whom I had brought along with me from the previ-

ous company – and whom they distracted till he finally heard my cries for help. I do know what it is like to see your life passing in front of you in that split second when you think you are going to die from being kicked to death," he said.

By the early age of 34 years old, David had achieved great success as a civil engineer. He had made a reputation for himself for getting things done against all odds working on complex construction projects in places such as the United Kingdom, Nigeria, Trinidad, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea.

By his own admission, David drew a "ridiculously high salary which eventually embarrassed me! I had changed and really did not like who I had become." He no longer had any "inner satisfaction" from his job and needed to fill a "massive void" in his life at the end of each day.

The "Poor" Rich

This began a period of intense soul searching. "By the time I was 40, after six years pondering my life and looking at both sides of the coin, I preferred being a "normal person" again – but didn't need to struggle like my parents and extended family because I knew my skills, initiative and experience would carry me through life. I realised I still did not feel comfortable in the presence of wealthy people who did not know poverty."

He speaks with a tinge of bitterness of an "ex-friend" who suddenly stopped communicating with him when David no longer had the big money, flashy car or went to expensive restaurants. "When I got him alone one day in 1988 and asked him, "Have I done something wrong to you? You don't seem to want to contact me anymore."

"Oh well David," he said with a snigger on his lips, "you used to be rich...." was as much as I let him say. I thanked him very much and satisfied myself that I did not need friends who were friends "because I had money". I moved to Indonesia shortly after and started life as a qualified English teacher in Jakarta in November 1989 on US\$200/month. Sheer bliss! The happiest four years of my life at that time."

Why Indonesia?

"I chose Indonesia as a place to live for the rest of my life in 1989. In 1986 when I was doing consultancy work for the Indonesian Embassy in London, I had already decided that when the time was right for me, I wanted to dedicate my life to helping alleviate poverty in the country

“I wanted my life to have a ‘real’ value – not measured by money, but by deeds. My quest to find the most disadvantaged place in Indonesia started in February 1994. In March 1998, I finally found a region that REALLY needed me. I found my destiny.”



THROUGH THE YEARS: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) DAVID, LEFT, AT FIVE WITH BROTHER AND COUSINS; IN NIGERIA IN 1977; WITH UNILEVER DIRECTORS AND BALI GOVERNOR'S REPRESENTATIVE AFTER OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF EBPP CENTRE IN MARCH 2005; AND RECEIVING THE MBE MEDAL FROM PRINCE CHARLES IN BUCKINGHAM PALACE IN 2005.

of my choice. I chose Indonesia to move to for the rest of my life because I felt most comfortable with the people, and from my experience of working in seven countries and travelling to a further 35, Indonesians were the warmest and most peace-loving people I had met in my life. I liked the nature of the Indonesian people and was not prepared to live in a country where violence was rife. I had seen enough in my life, especially in Nigeria, Trinidad and Papua New Guinea."

David decided he wanted to settle down and plan the rest of his life. He moved from Jakarta to Bali in late 1993 and in early 1994, his heart told him the time was right to start putting his life's experience to good use.

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Malnourished

In November 1993 when David finished his contract, he jumped into his car and drove to Bali in search of the most disadvantaged region in Indonesia. Living just north of Ubud, he saw very disadvantaged communities that were not getting any benefit from tourism and it was then that he knew what he had to do!

In North East Bali, he found thousands of people in a village, made up of 19 hamlets, scattered over 7,000 hectares of land and isolated from one another. The villages were living without roads, water, sanitation, adequate nutrition, health and education facilities, and hope. Children were the main victims and most were malnourished and had goitre due to iodine deficiency. Infant mortality was 25 percent. Their dwellings, mostly single rooms with bamboo walls and dirt floors.

Auto-Suggestion

David’s approach to helping the poor is interesting as he does not subscribe to the “quick-fix”, short-term approach of giving handouts to the poor. “These are not sustainable and rarely succeed. My way is, by a process of auto-suggestion, for the people to identify what they most want to improve - once you have empowered them with sufficient knowledge to be able to figure things out. I designed all programmes/projects to be models that can

be replicated anywhere in the world in similar, disadvantaged rural situations.”

Hence the whole village was assembled and asked David for help, not the other way around before he agreed to set up a non-profit foundation in 1998 called the “East Bali Poverty Project.” www.eastbalipovertyproject.org

Dire Need

David then asked the villagers what was their most important problem they wanted help for. Their response stumped David when they unanimously wanted education for their children instead of food or water, which were actually what they were in dire need of, “I cried with joy at the time – proud that my process of auto-suggestion bore the best result I could have dreamed of. When I asked the community leader in the very first hamlet Bunga, how their kids could sit on a sandy, cold floor in their community centre for starting school, he replied: “If you give us five sacks of cement, we will concrete the floor” followed by “if you give us some nails, we will make the children’s school furniture from our own trees.” I never had to ask the community to contribute – they believed so much in getting their kids, the first generation in history, educated.”

David’s programmes involving sustainable projects in children’s education, health improvement, nutrition, appropriate technology, infrastructure improvement, natural water resources development, sustainable organic farming and erosion control in this steep and dry terrain have become so successful that the regional Bali government plans to adopt his model and methodology throughout the entire regency.

Biggest Obstacles

David’s greatest challenge was getting people to believe that some of the worst poverty in Indonesia, and the worst he had seen in his life, even after working in the most impoverished region in Nigeria, was in Bali.

“Ha, ha, most people would go. You see, the image of Bali that is marketed to the world is the west and south. Everybody therefore “assumes” (dangerous word...) that all Balinese work in hotels or have handicraft shops. Then we come to asking “how do you define poverty?”

He explained: “The people never asked me for money or material wealth. They just wanted a source of clean water and knowledge on how to stay healthy. They wanted to know how life could be just a little better. They just didn’t know. They

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NEW AND EXISTING PUPILS OUTSIDE BUNGA SCHOOL WITH SPONSOR RAOUL WITTEVEEN, DECEMBER 2004.



Impressions of a 13-year-old Singaporean Teenager in East Bali

By Shaun Yim



DOES Bali sound like a paradise island for an ideal holiday? It would seem so, but did you notice the poor and the destitute? Many of them can be found in East Bali, on the arid slopes of Mount Agung and Mount Abang. The people there live in such extreme conditions that as many as 25 percent of their newborns die before the age of three years old. Every time when we turn on the tap for water in Singapore, I will now remember that these people have to travel great distances just to reach a common well.

The villagers in East Bali have only a half completed road. The rest of the paths are steep and dangerous rocky terrains. We had a difficult time getting there in a four-wheel drive traveling on mostly rocks and steep inclines. We are considered fortunate as most of the villagers walk everywhere they go. The nearest school is a three-hour walk away from the village.

Cassava

Their main source of food is cassava or as we know it, tapioca. If not properly cooked, cassava is also a key ingredient for making the deadly poison cyanide. Another food source is corn which they use for food or to sell. Some women in the village have big lumps at their throats. They suffer from a condition called “goitre”. The cassava that they consume everyday prevents the absorption of iodine.

Miserable

Their lives were quite miserable, until one day, David Booth arrived. The villagers described him as a “tall and funny looking long-nosed person”. He held meetings to discuss the needs of the villagers.

Surprisingly, the villagers all wanted an education for the future of their children so that they can lead a better life. After the discussions, David made three “promises” to their parents in return for three promises from them. Firstly David wanted the parents to clean and bathe their children daily, washing behind their ears and to keep their hair and nails short; secondly, they must send the children to school for three hours on three days a week and finally, the parents must encourage and learn from their children. In return, David promised to provide nutritious meals each day, provide an education programme that will be relevant to their lives and to teach them to stay healthy without the use of medicine.

The results were fantastic. Within three months, there was no absenteeism, no sick child or sick parent. It was truly amazing.

Worried

The children were partially excited yet partially worried about going to school, because they thought of their parents who needed their help in the fields.

David is also a very innovative person. Due to the recent landslides and soil erosion, David introduced a type of grass called “vetiver” to the villagers. The roots of these fascinating plants grow so deep that they would stop the frequent erosions. Another fascinating farming to create fertile soil is the worm farm. The villagers and children were taught how to feed the worms with leaves and cow manure to produce fine organic fertiliser.

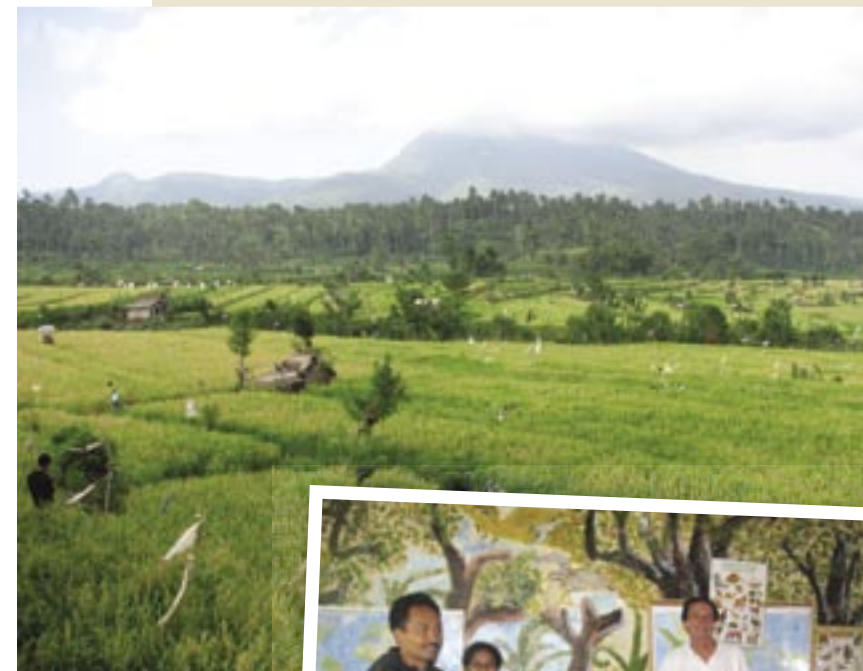
The children were then taught how to grow organic vegetables in their school garden. Potatoes, spinach, cabbage, tomatoes and carrots were being grown. These vegetables were for their school lunches.

The kids in turn taught their parents all the various steps of the gardening programme, from planting to seed-saving. Everyday, these children have something new to share with their parents.

Exceptional

These exceptional bright children are now taking a national exam. They only took two and a half years of part-time study to prepare, compared to other Indonesian children studying full-time and requiring 6 years to prepare. In Singapore we take our education system for granted but for these children in East Bali, going to school is a life-changing experience and a great privilege.

Although East Bali villages have improved facilities, thanks to David and his team, they are still in need for regular financial assistance and would greatly appreciate your help. If you have the time, visit them in East Bali like I did with my family and contribute to the development of the village. With your help, the people of East Bali can soon break free of poverty and continue their pursuit of a better life.



PHILANTHROPY

had no access to knowledge – or to any world outside what they knew from their own surroundings. It really wasn't fair. How did I overcome them? By being honest, patient and having a new belief: that when the time was right, assistance for my plans would come."

What does the East Bali Poverty Project (EBPP) need most now?

"A sturdy 4WD personnel carrier for transporting (a) EBPP staff and children, (b) transporting donors and potential donors to our programmes on the unmade mountain tracks, (c) to transport our volunteer dentists from the Mahasarwati University Dental Faculty in Denpasar to/from our east Bali villages (up to 14 people, 4-8 times a month) to our unique outreach dental programme with the only mobile dental clinic in Bali and to help facilitate our newly launched mother/child playgroup programmes and our TB awareness and intervention programmes."

Management of Donations

"Every single expenditure, whether as small as Rp500 for photocopying, must have a receipt, is recorded on special "Bukti Kas Keluar" slip, entered into our specially designed computerised accounting programme (designed by Bali-based Frank Wilson of Trend, Singapore), entered into a daily journal, cross-checked by Tri Budiyo (Secretariat Administrator & Vice Chairman of our foundation), cross-checked by me personally and then always balanced with the incoming funds etc. I give a 100 percent guarantee that we have an almost water tight and fool proof system ensuring that every single US Dollar and Rupiah is accounted for. Our accounts are audited every year by a registered Indonesian public accountant and all accounts are available for inspection. 100 percent of the funds raised go to charity."

Recognition: MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire)

"I was recommended by the then British Ambassador to Indonesia, Richard Gosney, after he had visited our programmes in 2003 – and told me that even though he had worked in many developing countries and seen many so-called sustainable development poverty elimination projects, he was amazed by ours because it was so 100 percent complete in the subjects we taught the children that all related to their life, and more importantly, that the children then taught their parents – ensuring lasting sustainability. I was the most shocked and proud person in the world when I got the personal phone call from the present Ambassador, Charles Humphrey in March 2004, whilst talking with our children in Cegi, telling me that "I have been instructed by the Queen to ask you if you will accept the MBE". I initially thought it was somebody calling with a sick joke and asked him if he really was the Ambassador and to please repeat what he said. When he did, I started dancing up and down and all of my staff and children thought I had finally gone totally mad! Problem was, you are sworn to secrecy until the official announcement is made – in June 2004. Hence I could not share my immense pride and joy with anyone – not even my Mum! The visit to the Palace was awesome! I still thought I was in a wonderful dream – until Prince Charles presented me with the medal." ■

How you can make a difference!

If you would like to visit, make a donation or help in any way with the East Bali Poverty Project please contact: David J Booth, Founder & Chairman
info@eastbalipovertyproject.org
www.eastbalipovertyproject.org

David's Most Satisfying Moments

- **"When we could eliminate impetigo** (a contagious skin infection) and see within three months of all of our education programmes being launched that we did not have a single sick child any more, thanks to the nutritious daily meals and glass of milk – and the relevant health, hygiene, nutrition and sanitation education we designed for the children."
- **"Seeing the joy and happiness of all of the mothers and newly healthy children** within weeks of having their safe water supply we developed from the mountain springs. The most thrilling moment for me being when I visited Daya hamlet and one of the Mums stopped at the side of our car to say, with a magic warm smile on her face "Thank you" – in English. That was worth more than any money could ever bring!"
- **Facilitating all of the 27 "posyandu"** (a health centre, pictured right) and knowing that for the first time in history, thousands of babies/infants can get essential vaccinations, nutritional supplements and all health checks.
- The joy of **seeing the many children after their cleft palate operations** – giving them a really new lease on life.
- The joy of **seeing all being able to now grow nutritious vegetables** and feed their families with real nutrition.
- **Presenting our children with their government certificates** for graduating primary and secondary school.
- **Knowing that we have virtually eliminated child mortality** through our relevant awareness programmes for iodine deficiency, vitamin A deficiency and safe water.
- **Seeing the children's joy at having library books** covering almost every topic under the

