

World Humanitarian Day - August 2010

Belgian Humanitarians at the UN World Food Programme



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What does your job entail?

I'm in charge of managing and implementing a UN joint programme on HIV/AIDS prevention on the main transport corridors (air/road/river/rail) of DRC: '*Transporting Hope*'. I serve also as focal point for the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), developing guidelines for the implementation of WFP's HIV programme. I also bring support to the development of *UN Cares* – a UN system-wide workplace programme on HIV – in DRC's field offices.

What is a day like for you?

I meet regularly with operational partners in order to launch, monitor or conclude HIV prevention activities such as projects, reporting, updates, communication and information, fund research, monitoring finances, follow-up procurement issues, etc. Every day I learn something new; for example, today I learned that 'protection' response in DRC has a long way to go but that I want to be part of this 'fight'. But I also learn about disappointments, having to realise that sometimes partners still consider UN agencies as 'milking cows', able to finance absolutely anything and everything.

How long have you been part of the humanitarian world?

I have 18 years experience as a passionate humanitarian worker.

Why did you choose to do this work?

It is a choice of life. I feel good, everyday, when I get up and realise the opportunities I have. I won't say I do this work only to "help others"; it won't be possible to keep it up for so long. I do it also for me. It is the way I found to exist, to feel happy and proud, to be there for a reason, to have a meaning of life that makes sense. It brings me back to reality. I see many unhappy 'humanitarian workers' around me who have lost track on the reason they are out here and their mandate as humanitarians. To work in a humanitarian setting implies many personal challenges, and one must be strong to keep it up. I made choices that enable me today to have a wonderful family life and a great job in an environment I chose, all at the same time. What more could one want?

How and why did you get into this field?

I had a wonderful childhood in a harmonious family, and I state this to stress the fact that no all humanitarian workers have something to run away from or some debts to pay to life. I was working in the advertising business and after 3 years, I realised that I'd rather stress on something more interesting than ads for pet food. I did not 'think' about it, it came naturally. And a series of events took me straight where I belonged. I quickly focused on children (raped, prostitutes, war kids, handicapped, drug addict, street children, etc). Initially I believed I could make a difference. Now I know I am just part of this enormous network of people who try again and again to just do something and to do it right.

How have your expectations been met?

Once I discovered that I could not change the world, I found some peace; became more humble. We work in areas where nothing can ever be taken for granted. So to avoid discouragement, it is important

to keep focus on the work to be done the best way we can, and to avoid taking failure too personally. I don't think my motivations changed, I just grew up; keeping the same passion and the same will.

What do you find especially rewarding about working in the humanitarian field?

Little things like a look, a hand shake, a smile of a kid that can finally 'spin the plate on a stick' (ref: circus schools in Bosnia). Contacts with colleagues that like and respect me; fighting for ideas I know are good and winning the cause. Feeling the "rightness" of a project by the way beneficiaries and partners get involved in it. Looking from far and seeing it "happen".

What do you enjoy most about this work?

It is a general feeling. Every day is a little war, a little fight to make things move on. Sometimes we win, sometimes we loose. But I like the fight. I can get a kick out of a final step taken in a financial issue that took weeks to be solved, and I can get bored during a field trip that is too set up and unreal. It is not linked to a specific part of the work; it depends on how things take place. I certainly like the challenge; it wakes me up at night, I take note and forget them the next day... I give what I can; it changes every day with regards of what takes place. I am like a Bifidus yogurt: I keep the energetic key component in me and reproduce it daily in a new pot.

What do you find especially challenging about working in the humanitarian field?

That really depends on the country. War zones are exhausting physically and mentally, but are amazingly rich emotionally and spiritually. Development areas are killing me; it is too slow, abstract, despite a nice environment and a great cultural life. So really, there are no rules. It depends of the setting we live in, the mandate we have, the structure we work in, the relation with the boss and colleagues, etc. I can get really drained by the slowness of things or by personal aggression that are unjustified. I quit jobs before in 2 days because I felt I was in a wrong environment or because I felt abused professionally. Some challenges I face them, some others I don't.

Jump ahead to the end of your life. What are the three most important lessons you have learned and why are they so critical?

1. Nothing is for granted: It helps me focus on the essential and fight for what really matters
2. One gets what one gives – Simple and true: So I tend to be good. It helps me control my character, which is quite volcanic..
3. To work for living, and not opposite: Obvious; never let crucial moments of life pass by because of work. Balance in everything.

How does your job allow you to express or "live out" your values?

Because my bosses trust me, I can do my job the way I want, so I manage my time, my energy, I can focus on what I know is important at work and at home, and I can make thing the way I feel are right. At the end it works out fine, quite often.

What are some of your typical self-care and coping strategies (both negative and positive) when you are stressed, fatigued, or anxious?

Negative: I go too fast to finish annoying issues otherwise I become obsessed and cant' focus; I avoid meetings because otherwise I make a mess; I become tougher to get things done. *Positive:* I limit my priorities and focus; I deal with issues fast to get over them; I take weekends off (no food shopping, no cooking, no kids friends inside, no noise...)

How do close friends and family support you?

My parents were always supporting me; the trust they have in me made me feel sure about me and my choices. In critical situations, they never said "don't go back" or "stop this madness", but rather "how are the people there? What can we do? ". Friends come and go. Key friends don't ask too many questions. They don't really want to know and it is okay. By not living a "daily" life close to them, I can sometimes have a better understanding of their problem and help them from far. But it is also great when we meet again, when visitors come, when the plane lands and we are back. It is always special, and at the same time, it is as if we were together yesterday.

What, where, and who is home to you? And what does 'home' mean to you?

Home is where my man, my kids and my dog are. I don't care about the size or the colour of the roof. Home is warmth, peace inside, shoes off, break, cuddles, barbie games, aperitifs, dog biscuits, music...