

And now for something completely different:



Businessman aims to help build African middle class

By RITA POLIAKOV
Staff Reporter

For Tal Dehtiar, Africa is about more than just AIDS, poverty and death.

It's about potential.

Dehtiar saw this potential when he helped found MBA's Without Borders (MWB), a not-for-profit group that matches MBAs with small businesses in developing countries.

It was MWB that lured him to Kenya about four years ago. He instantly fell in love.

"I just loved the people, I loved the place, but I was sick and tired of everybody talking about it like everybody's starving or like everybody has AIDS," he said. "[Africa] isn't as bad and scary as everyone says it is."

When in Africa, Dehtiar can't ignore the poverty, but it isn't all he sees.

"There are pockets of... war and starvation, but maybe if we start talking positively, we'll give [the people of Africa] hope."

Dehtiar, 29, started MWB when he was 25, after getting his MBA at McMaster University.

"I was kind of not feeling... it in terms of where I was going. The master's of business focused on Bay Street, I was interested in international development," he said.

This led him to launch MWB with a friend.

Since then, the group, which is now part of a larger NGO, has helped HIV-positive women make and sell handbags in Swaziland, has started a radio show in Singapore and has created an agri-business in Belize that supports rural communities.

Through the non-profit, Dehtiar learned the power of business. But he also learned that he wanted to do something outside the charity sector.

"I knew the charity world wasn't where I wanted to be," he said. "I've seen so much charity money wasted away on things that don't make sense."

Around May 2009, Dehtiar left MWB to start Oliberté Footwear, a shoe company that makes its products entirely in Africa. His goal is to help build the middle class in Africa through the company.

"In Africa, there are no small businesses. If you want to change an economy and the poverty in Africa, you need to build up the middle class," he said. "I love business, that's the truth. I love what business can do if used in the right way."

Oliberté uses leather from Ethiopia and will use rubber from Liberia. Right now, Dehtiar's working with three factories in Ethiopia, and hopes to reach other countries in the next few years. He's selling his shoes online and is starting to sell through some stores in North America.

Through his new company, Dehtiar is trying to prove



While Tal Dehtiar's friends travelled to Europe after high school, the founder of Oliberté Footwear decided to visit Central America and Africa instead.

that Africans can succeed if given the right tools.

"There's a lot more poverty, but these people don't want handouts, they just want to have the same life we have. Maybe they want to travel, maybe they want to have kids. They just don't have the same opportunities in terms of jobs," he said. "They want to work, but there's not enough decent jobs."

When working with factories in Africa, Dehtiar puts pressure on the employers to pay decent wages, treat women equally and give daily lunch breaks.

"We have some strict policies. If we're going to do this, we'll do this the right way," he said.

Dehtiar's love of business came from his parents, who have run a small furniture store for more than 25 years.

"I've seen first-hand what small businesses can do," he said, adding that his parents hired dozens of employees over the years.

"All these people... now have jobs because two immigrants decided to say, 'Hey, we're going to start a business.'"

Oliberté and MWB was also influenced by Dehtiar's love of travel.

When he was 17, most of Dehtiar's friends were talking about touring Europe, but he was always interested in developing countries.

"When [my friends] thought of travel, they thought Europe. It wasn't for me. I said, 'Europe's not going anywhere, but these developing countries are changing at such a fast pace,'" he said.

His first trip was to Belize in Central America. While in university, he also studied for four months in Singapore. Since then, he's helped build tree nurseries in Belize, has sold sandwiches on a beach in Chile and has backpacked through Kenya.

One of his favourite parts of travelling is finding Jewish communities.

"In [some] countries, I'm the first Jewish person most of these people have ever met, whether in Pakistan or... Liberia, they're not used to seeing a Jewish guy on his own," he said. "I look for the Jewish community everywhere I go."

While travelling alone in Zimbabwe, Dehtiar found the local synagogue.

"I'm not by any means a religious person, but I do love the idea that there are Jewish people all over the place," he said. "It's a nice little safe haven."

For Dehtiar, Jewish values are connected with his work in Africa.

"There's a lot of things as a Jewish person that you can really give. You've seen what your people have gone through and you see there's a lot of people in need," he said.

For more information, visit www.oliberte.com.



Tal Dehtiar, founder of Oliberté Footwear, makes all his shoes in Africa.

