

MAKING WISHES COME TRUE

NOMINATED FOR EMIRATES WOMAN OF THE YEAR AWARD 2011

FOUNDER OF MONYATI INITIATIVES, **MONJA WOLF**, TALKS ABOUT WHY SHE QUIT A GREAT JOB TO DEDICATE HERSELF TO COMMUNITIES IN NEED

BY KAREN ANN MONSY

FULLY COVERED AND headscarf firmly in place, Monja Wolf could only hope that her attire, fair complexion and light brown eyes would not draw more attention to herself than the next Pakistani woman at the checkpoint. A German national, she was about 200m from the Kashmir checkpoint on the Pakistan border and the signs in block letters warning "foreigners without permission" away from the area weren't exactly calming her nerves. She knew she was risking her safety, but if she got to complete the project she'd come for, Monja also knew this trip would have been well worth it all.

It's been more than a year since that hazardous journey and Monja's project — to deliver sewing machines as part of the renovation of a women's-only vocational centre in Kashmir — is now just one more on her list of missions (safely) accomplished.

With her willowy frame and engaging smile, the Abu Dhabi-based

former model, who turned 30 in August this year, is hardly someone you'd put down for risk taking or even manual labour. But Monja has done both and more, tackling several successful community projects since — all as part of her work for Monyati Initiatives, a non-profit social development organisation to support communities in need.

"Monyati' is an Arabic word that means a little wish that is close to your heart," she explains. "The idea was to fulfill small wishes of communities of NGOs, which was what we were doing, so the name was a perfect fit!"

Since founding the organisation in 2009, Monja's small team has helped raise over Dh2 million for NGOs around the world. They've constructed low-cost houses in the favela (shanty town) communities of Sao Paulo in Brazil, built a water well in the Amhara region of Ethiopia and supported special needs children and orphans in Khartoum, Sudan. Currently, they're working on constructing classrooms in Uttar

Pradesh — for which Monja and a team of volunteers will be going down to India in November — as well as building water cisterns in southern Mexico this month.

Each project has its own challenges, she agrees. Building low-cost houses in the favelas, for example, was quite physically demanding. "We stayed in one of the slum schools, ate and worked together with the families and didn't have [access to] a shower... It takes two days to build one house. We were building a hundred — and it's really physical hard work to wake up at 4.30am and construct till after midnight. We did try to get the guys to do more work, but there were no exceptions; we did our share," she jokes.

Monja's decision to quit a modelling career and dedicate herself completely to social work was not really a rational one. It was totally instinctive. "I love what I'm doing," she offers. "It's the most rewarding work and I always say you get much more than you give... It doesn't even make sense to my family, spending my own money to do what I love... but it feels like I'm investing in my own education because of all the experiences I gather."

Monja says her desire to help the needy was a seed sown from a very young age. "My family was heavily involved in sports and so, we would

travel frequently to Thailand for it. I saw suffering there like I didn't in Germany. My father was always pointing it out so that we actually paid attention to it and could understand all the blessings we had for ourselves." Those experiences, plus all the travelling she did as a model — she has lived in 14 different countries to date — impacted her in a way she couldn't forget. "All those impressions of imbalances in the world started accumulating and the desire [to do something] just became stronger and stronger," she figures.

While Monyati was no doubt a great initiative, Monja realised that it cannot be self-sustaining. Not when every dirham donated was being channelled straight back into community projects and any overhead expenses borne straight out of her pocket and those of her volunteers. She says she is relieved that many companies are keen to help out with funding and resources. "In the beginning, it was just an expression of the wish to work in the social sector," she says. "As simple as that: to help poor people. But eventually, we had to ask: how can we make ourselves sustainable and independent from donations?"

At this point, it was her experience working with [2006 Nobel Peace Prize laureate] Professor Muhammad Yunus to develop social businesses in Bangladesh that came to mind. She says, "While philanthropy and traditional charities are very well established in the UAE, I think we still lack the idea of creating a different approach through social entrepreneurship and businesses."

To further the Monyati cause, Monja set up the social fashion label Maat (www.maatbymonyati.com). "Maat partners with international designers and then produces and markets uniquely designed fashion



GRANTING WISHES: (from top) Monja at a slum school near Mirpur in Dhaka, Bangladesh; Ethiopian village kids using the completed Monyati water well; women sewing at the renovated vocational centre in Kashmir; outside one of the successfully constructed low-cost houses in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

items with 100 per cent of its net profit channelled back to the communities through tangible projects. In other words, if you buy a Maat product, you will know exactly what project you're helping," she explains, displaying designs for a Maat bag that enabled school furniture in Uttar Pradesh.

Though completing projects is her main priority right now, Monja doesn't discount the importance of volunteers as well. "I find it very important to focus not only on those who receive support but also to enable appreciation for those who give support," she points out. "Maybe that's a specific challenge for the UAE; sometimes people don't understand what it means to live in real poverty... When I went to Bangladesh, it was a very intense experience in terms of the level of poverty, the chaos and the dirt. When you return, those strong impressions push you to involve yourself more heavily in the social sector. That's why I want to get volunteers, to educate them about the challenges faced in developing countries and give them those impressions that they will hopefully take back home and perhaps, even create their own movement for."

Monja's efforts to ease living standards for global communities have hardly gone unnoticed. A nominee for the Emirates Woman of the Year Award this year, she is a great example of how one person can make a difference. "People generally wait for a 'moment' to start doing something," says Monja. "But you just have to start with small projects and after a couple of years you can look back and say, 'Wow, look at the change I've created'. It's one small step that will grow eventually over time."

(If you, as an individual or corporation, are interested to team up with Monyati Initiatives, visit www.monyati.com for more information.)

karen@khaleejtimes.com



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Photo: Jullin Bernard