

Belonging

A One-Man International Aid Organization

By Sara Corbett
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Traveling the world donating clothing, wheelchairs, books, and chickens (when he's not laying bricks, building wells, and planting trees), Barton Brooks is giving without borders.

If you were to go traveling with Barton Brooks, there are a lot of things you might do. You might go for an elephant ride in Laos or take a long hike through a pretty Ugandan farm valley. You might go to the beach in Dubai or spin prayer wheels in a Tibetan village, or maybe just wander awestruck around the Taj Mahal until you figured you'd seen enough to go home happy and fulfilled. But this is exactly when Brooks—the kind of traveler who seems perpetually awestruck and often punctuates a meaningful moment by calling out, "This is a- maaaay-zing!"—will start looking for something better and more hands-on to do, like shopping for hens with a Cambodian granny or digging a toilet for a Kenyan school under a blazing midday sun.

At 38, Brooks is what you might call a professional helper. Simply put, he spends most of his time doing the two things about which he is most enthusiastic: traveling and volunteering. Getting to this point involved swapping a career as a real estate broker in New York for a bare-bones, itinerant existence, which he says is far more fulfilling than making money ever was. "I felt lost for a long time," he says. "I had a bit of wanderlust and somehow never felt like I was home." But four years ago, inspired by an exuberant and needy group of kids he'd met outside a temple while vacationing in Cambodia,

While I was at work one night, I was looking through an old issue of O magazine (Dec. 2009), and saw one of those ubiquitous pictures of raggedy kids somewhere in Africa. A glance at the captions said Uganda and a double-take took me by surprise. Those were *my* kids - my Batwa kids, that I'd seen and worked with for the past two years. I could tell you just by the picture where they were standing, that it was in Rwamahano settlement at the school, on top of the hill above Lake Bunyonyi, and I could name those kids. Then to look at the date, the name of the guy standing with them promoting his "one man international aid organization" and to realize that I was there and I met that man while I was working - like so many other muzungus that came through to donate and give, or oogle and sigh at the poor Batwa. It was an exciting, and somewhat bittersweet moment. I couldn't believe I was seeing

this picture, and shocked with the realization that I knew it; then, the unexpected ache of missing those kids, the hike up that hill, the beautiful views, talking to the headmaster of the school to see what else we could do, and the talks we gave in the community center or sprawled in the grass. You don't think when you come back that simply, unexpectedly seeing a picture could affect you so much or evoke such emotions, but it does, and even thinking about it is just as jarring as when I saw it and realized those were my kids, my place, and I was there. I always used to laugh when I heard returned volunteers refer to places as *theirs*, but I understand that ownership now, that sense of pride at the work you did and the people you helped. No matter how much time passes, I realize it's always going to be *your* village and *your* kids or *your* women/men, not just because you worked there but because you belonged there. You were accepted and welcomed by them, and unknowingly perhaps, you accepted and welcomed them, forever, into your heart, so that they became a part of you - and that's where that ownership and pride comes from, that's where that bittersweet ache will always be. So, don't be surprised when day when this happens to you. Revel in the feelings, revel in the pride, the ownership, and the belonging. Then take that, and share it with everyone you see, because it deserves to be shared and revealed in.