Jordan Levy was at college in Wisconsin when he received a letter that would impact everything -- his future, his career plans and his place in the world.

The handwritten letter, postmarked South Africa, was from his dearest childhood friend, Jacob Lief. From the age of three, the two boys had been inseparable, growing up in a leafy, upscale suburb of New Jersey, best friends through grade school and middle school, where their world and their conversation revolved around typical American activities like baseball, play dates and joint family outings. Their two families shared many good times and a common set of values that they tried to instill in Jordan and “Jake.”

“Early on, volunteering was a social activity that brought our two families together -- working in soup kitchens, for instance,” recalls Jordan. “Sometimes, though, it was just directly observing how my parents interacted with the world. “My father is a judge who really believes in fairness and truth so, at home, he used to talk a lot about the justice system as it insures people get treated fairly regardless of social background. My mother worked in a relatively diverse school district close to Newark, New Jersey that faced serious problems. Both my parents had a lot of influence on me. ”

As often happens, family circumstances change and when Jordan was thirteen, Jake and his family moved abroad and the two friends went separate ways. Fast forward years later to college when Jordan was pondering what to do after graduation, assuming his path would lead him to success in the business world. That was when Jake’s letter arrived. Jake was in Port Elizabeth, an area called the Detroit of South Africa. He described a depth of poverty he had never seen in his life, with sewage literally running in the streets. He was living in the home of a school teacher named Banks Gwaxula who had befriended Jake on an earlier visit. Jake said they were working out of a broom closet trying to help the impoverished children in the townships.

“It had a dramatic affect on me,” says Jordan, “and the next time we met, we talked about it extensively.”

The seeds of social justice that had been planted in Jordan as a child by his parents were taking root but they still needed time to bear fruit. After graduation, Jordan and his girlfriend, Jana, headed to Spain to teach English. But when they returned to America, Jake was waiting with a grand plan. He and Banks had started an organization called Ubuntu...a name that means recognizing our common humanity and being there for each other. He described its mission as simple yet radical: to help provide Port Elizabeth township children with what they deserve-- everything. They had started small but they needed to raise money to expand their vision. Inspired by Jake’s mission and encouraged by Jana’s excitement about joining the project, Jordan jumped in as a volunteer.
“I didn’t know much about South Africa, I could barely say the name Ubuntu and I wasn’t getting paid. But I said, great. Let me sleep on your couch and I’ll help you fund raise.”

Jordan recalls this as a “crazy, wild times for 23-year-olds trying to figure out how to run an organization.” He and Jana pitched in on every job that needed doing.

After the first year, he was hooked, not just on the work of the Ubuntu Pathways, but on the non-for-profit sector. But when he told Jake he wanted a job with Ubuntu in South Africa, he got a surprise. Jake said “No, because our model is based on local leadership, done by people from the community.”

Jordan wasn’t deterred. He wanted to learn more about the non-profit sector so he went back to school for a graduate degree. With diploma in hand, he contacted Jake again about working at Ubuntu. Jake accepted both him and Jana as volunteers for six months in South Africa.

As with every startup, they had no clearly defined roles. Jordan says they did everything from cleaning floors to running programs. Their six-month commitment turned into eleven years. During that time, they married, started a family and learned a lot about what it takes to make change in the world.

“It has never been easy,” says Jordan, “which is something I try to translate to young people interested in doing this work. The challenges you face can sometimes be brutal, failures can be difficult; the stakes are very high and the goals ambitious.”

Jordan says building Ubuntu to the point where it is now has taken a decade in which they had to adjust their expectations for change in a country that has been under racist rule for a hundred years and streamline the initial goal to pass off the leadership of Ubuntu to people on the ground. But their learning curve has paid off.

Today, the “broom closet” where the Ubuntu Pathways started in 2001 has grown into a 25,000 square foot headquarters, providing comprehensive services under one roof, including classrooms, a pediatric HIV clinic, a theatre and a rooftop garden. All of the facilities are built for one purpose: to give South African children the same high quality education and health care that American children can access - to be an advocate for them from “cradle through career.” And although Jordan is now living back in New York with his family, he and Jana are still working with Ubuntu.

“It was always a struggle to decide if this was the thing to do with our lives. So many careers will push you in a direction counter to all the things you’ve been taught. But having approximately two thousand kids on a new pathway is amazing. “I was very fortunate that my parents raised me in a particular way with certain values: 'This is the way we treat other people; this is what’s important in life. It's not money, it’s relationships.’ I don’t ever want to forget that. It has allowed me to live life based on the things that are most important.”

Jordan Levy is the Chief External Relations Officer at Ubuntu Pathways (formerly Ubuntu Education Fund), a non-profit organization that shepherds orphaned and vulnerable children living in the townships of Port Elizabeth, South Africa from cradle to career, providing them with everything they need to reach their potential.