FIRST PERSON

BY BRADLEY BRODER

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How to Start an African Charity
Seven years ago, *Lifestyles Magazine* published its first (and only) article about why this ide-alistic, bleeding-heart, ex-Peace Corps volunteer had recently started a nonprofit educational organization in Africa. For those of you who have patiently held your breath for the follow-up story, your wait is over.

As a former Peace Corps volunteer, I felt guilty by association and found myself at a crossroads: I could spend my life persuading others that foreign charities do more harm than good. Or I could start my own charity by leveraging my understanding of what makes the others so ineffective. Can you guess which road I chose?

The inspiration for starting KEF was equal parts *tikkun olam* and kismet. It happened in grad school when a friend handed me a $100 bill before I departed on a research trip to Kenya. Naively I asked, “What’s this for?” He smiled wide and patted me on the back. “That’s for you to figure out. I trust you’ll find someone in Kenya who can really use it.”

That bill burned a hole in my pocket for three weeks until my former neighbor—a Kenyan mama whose kids helped me learn Swahili during the Peace Corps—told me about her inability to pay her daughter’s school fees. Without hesitation, I reached into my pocket and handed her the cash. That girl would later be known as the Kenyan Education Fund’s very first beneficiary, a Muslim girl helped by the *tzidakah* of a Long Island Jew.

The story of the Muslim and the Jew quickly spread among my family and friends, inspiring more gifts that were used to enroll more Kenyan children in school. Things quickly progressed. KEF became a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization faster than you can say “tax deduction.” It was as though anyone who ever read *The Economist* wanted to be part of an African charity start-up, so they lined up with pro-bono *this* and donated *that*. Random people would thank me for “saving the world,” always wanting to put me in touch with their relative who “also spent time in Africa.” Heck, this magazine wrote an article about me when we only had 110 students! Seven years later—and as a result of all this goodwill—KEF is now the largest nonprofit educational scholarship provider in Kenya, having awarded more than 1,500 educational scholarships in a country without free public schooling.

The Kenya Education Fund—with its focus on helping people acquire the knowledge and skills they need to escape pov-
landscape also opened us up to two incredible opportunities for scaling. In 2011, the Nomadic Kenyan Children’s Educational Fund (NKCEF) proposed a merger of our organizations, instantly doubling the size of our program, donor base, and board of directors. I was thrilled to now support so many nomadic Kenyans, whose culture presents extraordinary challenges to education. Incredibly, one of these nomadic students excelled as a result of our scholarship and became the first Masai girl to ever attend Harvard as an undergraduate.

Three years later, we were approached again, this time by the Children of Kibera Foundation (CoKF)—a scholarship fund for students from Nairobi’s biggest slum. We consolidated our operations with CoKF in 2014, inheriting hundreds of brilliant scholars and faithful donors. No five-year plan could have ever predicted this.

My grandparents were Holocaust survivors who were not afraid to talk about it. From a very young age, I would listen to their horrifying memories of life (and mostly death) in the camps. Their stories of man’s cruelty toward other men are forever etched in my core like the crooked blue numbers tattooed carelessly on their soft, sagging forearms. There are also incredible stories of people in the camps who risked their lives to help my grandparents survive. There will always be injustice in the world, just as there will always be people to stand up against it. I would not be here today if it were not for their bravery. That is why when I stood at that crossroads of starting a charity or fighting the status quo, I chose a life of helping others. IM