When you travel with Spark Ventures, you’ll find that you’ll start your journey in the spirit of giving but return home feeling like you’re the one who has received. In fact, travel is what led to the organization’s birth, is the backbone of how it continues to thrive, and, as a result, how it has helped pull communities around the world out of poverty. It all started back in 2007, when three friends got the travel bug and chose Zambia as their destination. When they arrived, they were placed in the home of a host family and were introduced to Charles Mumba, the founder of a school and orphanage in a small village called Twapia. The men were so captivated by this tiny school, they ended up spending their whole trip there instead of exploring Africa. At the end of their visit, the school had won the men’s hearts and as they were leaving, Spark Ventures co-founder Rich Johnson asked Charles and his wife what they needed most. Charles replied, “We need a partner that will help us stand on our own two feet.” And in that little moment is when Spark Ventures began.

The sole purpose of Spark Ventures is to help find sustainable solutions to lift communities out of poverty. Their unique approach, however, isn’t one where they target a community in need, do a couple of large projects and then leave. Quite the opposite. Instead, they partner with grassroots organizations, organizations that start from a simple idea and are passion based. They look for these operations currently in existence that have the potential to create jobs and resources for the community, but are in need of guidance, direction and tools to thrive. As Gwyn Thomas (Spark’s Marketing & Events Manager) explained, “We don’t reinvent the wheel but instead help support what has already been started.” For example, the school in Zambia already existed, but now with Spark Ventures as its partner, the school has grown immensely and is now educating, feeding and providing health care for 400 children. Spark Ventures has also helped the school create a vegetable farm, which not only functions as a food source for the school and orphanage, but will also generate income from selling excess produce.

Spark Ventures started in Zambia but has spread to two other communities since its creation. In Mexico, they’ve partnered with Entreamigos. Entreamigos was started by one woman who saw a need in her community that she could fill. She invited the community to join her at a picnic table under a mango tree with the belief that everyone has something to teach and everyone has something to learn. One-by-one, people shared their skills and knowledge with each other. Soon, an entire group of women began creating arts & crafts from recycled materials which they began selling to earn an income. Spark Ventures looks at an operation like this, sees the potential it has and does what it can to help it thrive. For example, they offer strategic support.
They have people on the ground, here in Chicago, who have ongoing conversations with the organizations’ founders to figure out where they are economically and how their organizations can not only grow, but also help generate income and resources for the community.

In addition to offering funding and strategic support, they also provide psychological support. In Nicaragua, where there has been massive political unrest, Spark Ventures sponsors a psychologist to be on site to talk to kids after school and provide counseling. Essentially, if the community needs it, Spark Ventures works hard to provide them the tools to create it, find partners and volunteers to offer it, or sponsor it themselves. They do things like fund teacher salaries, provide professional development, offer scholarships, provide health care, sponsor meals and offer guidance in taking a small idea and turning it into something that lifts up entire communities. They don’t just help once and leave. They are in constant communication and visit frequently; to support their partner organizations and do all they can to make sure they have what they need to continue to grow and thrive. As Gwyn notes, “We’re not offering a hand-out, we’re offering a hand up to help people stand on their own two feet.”

So how is all this possible? Well, Spark Ventures always goes back to how it started: travel. Their catchphrase is “Travel is in our DNA.” As a result, they provide travel opportunities for anyone interested in engaging with the organization. After all, everything has more impact when you see it firsthand. Gwyn states, “If you want to meet the people whose lives are being changed by Spark, join us on a trip. Your experience will be life-changing and world changing!” They take trips throughout the year where active supporters as well as those who are simply curious about the organization, can go to one of the three locations to see for themselves the fruit of Spark Ventures’ labor. While there, they will do actual work but also have the experience of engaging with the partner’s leaders and the children who have been provided an opportunity to succeed in life. It’s through these relationship building moments that new ideas are born and passion is reignited. You see the community you’re helping and want to do more.

This, in fact, is how Gwyn got involved with Spark Ventures. She heard about the organization and decided to go along on a trip to Zambia. When she returned home, she couldn’t get it off her mind. She decided, as she puts it, to “dip my toes in,” and become an intern. As a business and economics major, she soon found this was what she needed to do – it made sense. She describes that, “It felt relatable to what I was learning and how I wanted to make an impact.” Now, she works full-time for the organization. If she hadn’t trav-
eled for herself to see the work being done, she may have never gotten so involved. Traveling has such a big impact—and so, everyone at all levels is highly encouraged to participate in these trips.

As a result, most people who get involved with Spark Ventures tend to stick around for a while. It’s a like-minded community, and thus, easy to get hooked. When I asked Gwyn who volunteers and works with Spark Ventures, she noted that the demographic is massive. They have a Board of Directors and Associate Board of young professionals who are discovering what philanthropy means to them. They travel, fundraise, advise, volunteer at events, invite the partner organization visitors to their schools and spread the word about Spark to their friends. Spark’s volunteers and strategic supporters span the age range, from 7 years old to over 85 years old.

So, how can you help this organization? Most organizations say, “Donate.” But, when asked, Gwyn immediately responded, “Have lunch with us!” She said there are so many passionate members that, yes, they’ll never turn down a financial donation, but what they prefer is to have conversations with anyone wanting to help. They want their donors and volunteers to not simply write checks or show up for an event. They want them to understand, see the impact first-hand and feel the passion. After all, this is what keeps folks coming back. She explains they see immense value in collaborative relationships. Spark Ventures is unique as an organization because, as Gwyn notes, “conversation is their motive movement.” Through conversations, they make connections, understand people’s various skill sets and interests, and create bonds that often last for years. As a result, Spark has developed a network of dedicated supporters who help them focus their resources in the areas of business, job creation and capacity building as they seek to have a lasting and sustainable impact.

Lastly, they encourage people to travel with them. As Gwyn experienced herself, when you engage with our partners and walk alongside them, you see the difference being made in these communities, and you’ll walk away wanting to do more. After all, as the saying goes, “Not all who wander are lost.” Truly Sparks Ventures has taken this thought to the max, as they continue to help communities thrive.

Curious to find out more? Click on the links below!

Spark Ventures Website!

Travel Page

Read their blog Here