

Finance to philanthropy

Through a recent business venture in Mozambique, Eric Kohn (BSc Natural Sciences 1968) is providing opportunities for the local community – and Glasgow’s medical students.



After joining the Officer Training Corps while studying at Glasgow, Eric Kohn served in Airborne Forces with the Reserve Army for 35 years, reaching the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, and was awarded the Territorial Decoration with three bars. He has also been an engineer and today is Managing Partner of Baron’s Financial Services, based in Geneva, Switzerland, with a subsidiary in the UK.

As founder of Baron’s Financial Services, based in Geneva, Eric has helped turn around the fortunes of several businesses. It was over lunch there one sunny day that he heard about tantalum mining company Noventa, located in the remote village of Marropino in Mozambique. The country is a conflict-free source of this rare metal, used in every mobile on the planet.

Since then, Eric has been instrumental in helping Noventa and until recently he was chairman of the company. However, rather than focusing solely on the extraction of tantalum, he was also committed to improving the lives of the villagers, many of whom are Noventa’s employees. Eric explains, ‘The company wanted to ensure it employed local people and recognised its responsibility to look after them too. Marropino is six hours into the bush and the nearest medical facility is three-and-a-half hours away. We put water pumps into the village, built a primary school where the government funds five teachers who work in two shifts with 500 pupils, and built and provided a health centre where the government funded two nurses.’

In addition, Eric as Chairman arranged for Noventa to provide funding for senior elective placements in Marropino for up to four Glasgow medical students this year, covering all of their travel and subsistence expenses, which his successor will hopefully continue. ‘The collaborative project allowed the medical students to spend some time in Marropino and enabled them to conduct a needs assessment and look at how we can help meet the UN’s millennium goals on things like immunisations, malaria and diarrhoea,’ he says.

The first group of students, Aysha Latif, Iain Martin and Urmila Paramarajah, returned recently and spoke to *Avenue* about their experiences. ‘Our task was to work out achievable objectives that future students could complete in four to five weeks. There are a lot of issues to tackle but we quickly realised that having things like education days and teaching people about nutritious food were more realistic for us,’ explains Iain.

‘The food demo was good because malnutrition is a problem. The women make a maize-based porridge, which lacks vitamins and minerals, but the World Food Programme provides something called Plumpy’nut, based on peanut flour and high in sugar, fat and protein. So we made our own version of this.’

Urmila continues, ‘The Plumpy’nut is available at a clinic three-and-a-half hours away and the villagers have forms to receive this, but they’re not filled out. So we went to the hospital, completed the forms and got the Plumpy’nut.’

Iain adds, ‘We also did sex education. The main age of pregnancy is 14 so we tried to emphasise that it’s best to wait, but we also demonstrated how to use condoms. The men and women met separately to discuss condom use but village elders quickly moved between the two groups and so the whole session became a collaborative endeavour.’

Professor Phil Cotton, of the University’s Medical Undergraduate School, was responsible for building the relationship with Eric and selecting the students from the many that applied. Phil himself visited Mozambique 23 years ago as a medical student. ‘My experience helped articulate some of the reasons why I was studying medicine and it has exerted an ever-present influence since. As well as developing clinical skills, it provides a holistic population view of medicine and gives students an appreciation of healthcare delivery and the interface between poverty, culture and human rights,’ he says.

For Eric, supporting his Alma Mater was a major motivation for setting up the project: ‘I had a great time at the University and many of my friends were medical students, so I wanted to put something back. We had already started a scheme with Earth Science students and graduates, who came to the mine in 2010. Then I found Phil, who had worked in Mozambique before and knows Portuguese, and we got the project going.’

As a result, Aysha, Urmila and Iain have shared a rewarding experience and fully appreciate the work being done. ‘What Noventa is doing here is altruistic,’ says Aysha. ‘They don’t have to do this but they are taking an ethical route and trying to be more locally focused. They’ve gone about it the right way too – clean water first, then primary healthcare services and primary education.’

More student electives are planned, forging what will hopefully be a long-term relationship with Noventa, thanks to Eric, and the village of Marropino. Urmila feels positive about the village’s future: ‘The community has learnt to trust us. There’s a love there, a two-way thing between them and us. The more students that go out there, the more that will grow.’