



ART WITH HEART

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Monique Julian, the dynamo behind Creative Corners, tells Ruby Boukabou how she transformed a long-term travel bug into a successful global organisation.

CREATIVE CORNERS IS A GLOBAL VOLUNTEER program that offers creative types an opportunity to travel to South and Central America and skill-share within local communities. Instead of lazing on a beach by an expensive hotel, tourists can devise a play in a Bolivian orphanage, teach photography to teenagers in a Mayan village in Guatemala, share some dance moves with children in Costa Rica or plant a garden in Peru.

For Canberra-raised Monique Julian, travel was always on the cards. Her parents were travellers and she found volunteer work abroad a natural post-study step. "There is no greater success in life than living the way you want to live and following your passions," says Monique, "mine being travel, the arts and theatre, and trying to make a difference through community projects."

Monique first travelled overseas in her third year of university when she was awarded a six-month scholarship as an intern in an advertising agency in Malaysia. She continued travelling through Asia, and by the time she returned to

Australia, she was hooked. Within two years she was off again. Four years passed and she was still travelling, using London as a base.

Monique lived and worked in Bolivia for seven months. "I fell in love with La Paz, nestled in an incredibly striking canyon at 3,600m and surrounded by the stunning snow-capped peaks of Illimani," she recalls. "The place has so much character, and the views are just stunning. I loved to see the Chola ladies in their traditional dress, the women carrying their babies, animals, food and all sorts in brightly coloured South American-style pieces of material on their backs."

With a BA (Honours) in Communication (majoring in Theatre/Media and Advertising), and having spent four years as director of a theatre group for adults with intellectual disabilities, Monique wasn't content with the obvious English-teaching posts. She organised creative workshops in the street and in rural villages, running art classes at a home for deaf children and writing and producing a Christmas musical and circus performance with 80 children from an orphanage. She spent another five months travelling through South America: "The beauty, food, people, culture, music, chaos, smells, noise, hustle and bustle, the magic of the Andes, the buzz of Brazil – it all gets me."

So how did Monique transform herself from a bubbly Aussie traveller into the director of a London-based international creative arts travel

organisation with over a dozen South American projects? "The first job I got when I returned to the UK after a year in South America was as an office manager for a phone message IT company – it just wasn't me... I was at a bit of a loss as to what to do with my incredible volunteer experience. I tried to think of what was the most creative way to move forward and how to continue to live my personal philosophy. So I reflected upon my three passions: travel, arts and community projects and – BAM – decided to combine them! Why not start my own volunteer travel company, specialising in community arts projects? My volunteer experience in Bolivia has been my biggest life-changing experience – living there, being part of the community and being able to make a difference provided me with the inspiration and motivation to establish Creative Corners."

"The initial idea was followed by two years of non-funded research and business set-up: name, logo, legal structures, insurance, child protection policies – creating a company involves so much more than I ever realised. I worked on just the concept, my research and business plan for the first 12 months. In the second year it was about making contacts, arranging my planning trip, visiting the projects and setting up accommodation, support networks and infrastructure. To see it all finally come together was incredibly exciting."

To scope out future ventures, Monique visited seven countries and 21 projects in ten weeks. "The projects I have in Bolivia came from contacts I made when I was living there and the other projects have come from people contacting me and through researching the projects that would be most in need of creative volunteers on the internet. Through these contacts I then arrange a planning trip to meet with everyone, set up accommodation with host families, local flats and B & Bs and find out about living conditions in each of the countries."

According to Monique, Creative Corners is the only volunteer agency specialising in 'creative projects'. This entails working with established projects that support and care for orphans, abused, abandoned, street or 'at risk' children. "Process is important, but striving towards a final goal or 'product', whether that be a performance, photo exhibition, CD recording or published calendar, provides a tangible goal and win/win situation for everyone involved," says Monique. "We also give 100 per cent of profits back to the projects; with these funds I hope to provide creative education resources and possibly build music and arts centres."

The business side of things can pin Monique to one location for a period, but she is pleased to be currently back on the road, moving around South America to visit various projects. "I started in February, visiting a new project in Guatemala, then went to Costa Rica for a month to check out Monteverde and Puerto Viejo where I send volunteers. Puerto Viejo was amazing, and as a volunteer/holiday destination just stunning. I had one 50-year-old Danish lady who had been volunteering there for three months and it was great to meet her. She had been running STOMP-style workshops with the kids. From Costa Rica, it was to Peru for two and a half weeks again, working with the project and two of my volunteers there."

Monique is now in La Paz in Bolivia working closely with six volunteers, arranging Christmas tunes in Spanish and English, laying down a backing track and recording a CD with one of the orphanages. "We will then try to get a UK school to record some parts of the tunes in English and sell the CDs to raise funds at Christmas," says Monique.

Creative Corners is looking for creatives and teachers who can act, play an instrument, tell stories, dance, paint, build, teach circus skills, sculpt, design, or plant gardens. Projects can be from one week to over three months and current opportunities are located in Guatemala, Costa Rica, Peru and Bolivia. Its founder is clear about its mission. "I want to encourage and inspire other artists, teachers and travellers to realise their own creative visions with communities where they will make a real difference."

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Monique Julian doing what she loves best.



Volunteers playing with children.