

AIDS WORKER :: Kalpana
has dedicated her life to
raising awareness

mission possible

WOULD YOU RISK YOUR OWN LIFE TO HELP OTHERS IN
DANGER? RADHIKA DANDENIYA MEETS THREE EXTRAORDINARY
WOMEN WHO DO IT FOR A LIVING...

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Kalpana Sabapathy, 35

HIV Advisor, MSF Holland

Every medical student has this romantic notion of helping others; it's what makes medicine such a noble profession. But since qualifying as a doctor I wanted to turn this idealism into reality. I had this strong urge to work in developing countries; I love travelling and engaging with different races, and the hardships that would stop most people in their tracks didn't bother me in the slightest.

It was during my seven years doing hospital rounds in the UK that I became interested in HIV. I treated so many immigrant patients suffering from the disease, and had consequently contracted TB. Their stories touched me, and I knew that if I was going to help people it would be those affected by this horrible disease.

I'd heard about Médecins Sans Frontières; it's a household name among the medical humanitarian organisations. Reading about it, it just seemed to offer me the experience of what it truly meant to be a doctor. I dropped in an application and they called me in for an interview.

It wasn't the usual chat that most people have. Apart from asking about my medical background, they wanted to know if I was strong enough to handle tough situations, because I'd be stationed out in countries

A mother brought in something that looked like a skeleton, like some unknown creature. But then she tickled it and it started to smile. That was when I realised all human life is precious

ravaged by war, or destroyed in natural disasters.

They ended up offering the position to me, and even wanted to discuss a mission out in Afghanistan. I'm not normally so hesitant, but given the current situation I had to think about it. Unfortunately the night before I was to give my decision, five MSF personnel had been murdered in Afghanistan. The mission was immediately aborted and I never got a chance to go out there.

You'd think I'd be fazed by events like that, but I've never been one for fear and wouldn't ever let emotion cloud my decision when accepting a mission. Besides MSF has vast political experience, and it's only when they've assessed security on the ground that they send us in, so the danger is pretty minimal.

So far MSF has taken me on the most

thrilling adventures, whether it be travelling on roads riddled with potholes in Liberia, driving through security checks with soldiers brandishing AK-47s or working in remote villages that have no electricity or water, like those in Myanmar, Burma.

As an HIV advisor, my main duties are to supervise HIV and TB cases, as well as co-ordinate nutritional and sexual health treatment. The one thing I've realised is that treating HIV in the UK is so different to treating it in developing countries. There are so many myths to battle, and it's tragic to see HIV sufferers being thrown out of family homes or kept away from the communal areas. No matter where I've been, I've helped spread awareness about safe sex, targeting high-risk groups and protecting sufferers from persecution.

I do remember crying a few times; In



DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE :: Kalpana supervising medical teams in Myanmar. Throughout her career at Médecins Sans Frontières, she's spread the word about AIDS awareness in the developing world.

Myanmar a mother brought in her child, I'd never seen anything like it; it was a skeleton, like some unknown creature. But the mother tickled it and it started to smile. That was a defining moment for me; this was a human being. I was moved to tears, and immediately set to treating it. Its only when you see that same child a few months later walking around chubby as ever, that you see how empathy is a good thing. I even funded the child's sister's schooling for 2 and a half years because I became so attached to this story.

As you can see things get very intense, and I think that's why most people join MSF on a short-term basis. I however have made a career out of it and since being around the world I can't really envisage myself settling in the UK. The problems here are so trivial compared to what's going on over there. Don't get me wrong, coming home is a nice break, and there's never a shortage of people taking an interest in what I do. I just feel more fulfilled when I'm out there making a difference.

• For more information, visit:
www.msf.org/unitedkingdom

Yaso Ariaratnam, 39

Financial Controller, MSF

Saying goodbye to 65K a year is never easy, but for me it had to be done. I was working for a big oil company and it just sucked the life out of me. I'd always wanted to give a little something back, maybe join an NGO and go abroad helping others. But common sense said to hold out for a while until the time was right.

And that was when my relationship ended. I was fed up and a colleague of mine who had been volunteering part-time with Médecins Sans Frontières told me that the organisation was not just for medics, but people from various fields, including finance. After some further research I thought why not? I submitted an application along with my CV.

I was invited for a numerical test and an interview. They wanted to know how well I'd get on with people seeing as I'd be working with MSF volunteers from all over the world.

I wasn't put off by the prospect of facing some tough situations, especially since you can choose what projects to do. But you never really grasp how difficult things can get and I definitely didn't.

They say the first two months at MSF are the toughest, and for me it certainly was; my first mission was to set up hospitals in Bihar. As an accountant my job was to monitor budgets and look after the workers. I found it difficult; it was a brand new mission with only three MSF members on the ground, so there were mountains of paperwork to plough through. But witnessing scenes of immense poverty was even worse. I kept coming across children running around dirty and barely clothed, with their parents living in absolute squalor. It was an emotional experience, and with no means of contacting family back home I felt very much alone.

If that wasn't enough, my next mission was in Pakistan following the earthquake. I spent five days in both Islamabad and then Muzaffrabad, and we roughed it out. You could smell rotten bodies and animals by the side of the road, which wasn't



If I'd stuck to my job, maybe I'd be a millionaire, but this has made me rich in other ways...



HELPING HAND ::
Yaso in Burma testing
kids for malnutrition



pleasant since we had to sleep outside in tents. But what was even worse was that there was one measly toilet between 25 members and with such extreme weather conditions I asked myself can I do this?

But it only takes one look from a patient, and you snap out of it. I spent some time travelling with mobile clinics and one time we were stationed near the mountains. We saw people carry the injured on household beds and when they saw us, it was like their prayers had been answered. It was then that I remembered

why I was there and it kept me going.

Like I've said, giving up a good salary is never easy, and if I'd stuck with my job I might've been a millionaire. But working for MSF has made me rich in other ways – it's job satisfaction personified, and if it wasn't for them I'd never have met my husband. Right now I'm ready for anything especially now that I've got someone to share the experiences with.

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www.msf.org/unitedkingdom

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NOBLE CAUSE ::
Razmi's swapped a career in medicine to help those most in need

I went to a friend's wedding in Sri Lanka the day the Tsunami struck. There was utter chaos and being the person I am, I approached the only trusted agency out there, the British Red Cross

Razmi Farook, 33
Operations Officer, British Red Cross

With a politically astute family like mine you'd expect their children to grow up interested in what goes on around them. But when my parents heard that I wanted to risk my life in war torn countries, they were shocked – they'd dreamt of me being a hotshot doctor.

But I knew that life wasn't for me. I love the great outdoors and as child I went to Sri Lanka every year to help out on my uncle's rubber plantation. I even spent one summer there working at a radio station reporting on social issues and development projects. The whole experience got me thinking; how good would it be to help those in real danger? And that was when my desire to make a difference was born.

I did an MA and MBA in social project development with an eye for getting into an NGO or charity. I was lucky; my first job was in Sierra Leone for Oxfam. It was a beautiful country, but I had to be very sensitive to the history and ignore the day-to-day scenes of incredible violence.

But a country's conflict always catches up on you. One night while driving back to camp, two ex-combatants jumped into the jeep, pointed a gun in my face and demanded my handbag. As my training had taught me, I handed it over, but they remained in the car. I quickly started swerving the jeep to catch someone's attention, and they bolted. That was the only moment my life was in real danger, which is nothing compared to those who faced death everyday.

Apart from catching malaria a few times, I was enjoying my time with Oxfam. But in 2004 my career took a significant turn. I

went to a friend's wedding in Sri Lanka the day the tsunami struck. It was chaos and being the person I am, I approached the only trusted agency out there, the British Red Cross. I volunteered with the Sri Lankan branch for six weeks dealing with child protection. I worked my hardest because I cared about Sri Lanka so much.

Meanwhile my boss at Oxfam wanted me back in Sierra Leone, but I was too distressed and so quit my post. Back in the UK I applied for a position at the British Red Cross as an Operations Manager in charge of recovery programmes in Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

I went out to areas destroyed in the tsunami, raising cash grants to supply local tradesmen who'd lost their livelihoods. As always it was the poorest who suffered most and it was up to me to ensure money was allocated efficiently.

Coincidentally a lot of the places I worked in had also been heavily affected by the civil war. As an ex patriot, I feared locals wouldn't accept me, but the Red Cross ensure their staff are kept safe, and always practise a neutral stance. So whatever my political opinions were, I kept things professional. Besides when you see people with literally nothing, you end up not giving a damn about politics.

And now I'm really happy. I'm giving something back to the homeland I love, and now my parents are proud that their daughter has carved out a noble career of her own.

• For more info visit:
www.redcross.org.uk

CALM AFTER STORM ::
Razmi with local farmers in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the tsunami

