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# COLLECTIVE

ISSUE 11

**REINVENT  
OR DIE**

MADONNA  
CONVERSE  
NINTENDO  
KYLIE MINOGUE  
STEVE MARTIN  
H&M

WHAT IF  
YOUR LIFE WAS  
CODED?

+

**THE  
BOUNCE  
BACK**

*from rock bottom*

*Blondie*

ROCK'N'ROLL'S  
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*on life as a grown-up*

FASHION / DESIGN / FILM / FOOD / TECH / ART / SOCIAL CHANGE / TRAVEL



# miracle among THE MASAI

DURING A COMING-OF-AGE ceremony in a remote Tanzanian village, high-flying lawyer TRACEY SAWYER decided to swap her six-figure salary for charity work in the Masai community. Little did she know that her destiny had much more in store.

WORDS: SARAH MARINOS

**T**here are moments when Tracey Sawyer has to pinch herself. Such as when she wakes up in her traditional Masai mud hut home, or boma, and steps outside in the cool morning air to find giraffes grazing nearby, and spectacular views of Mount Kilimanjaro in the distance.

Those are the kinds of moments that can still take Tracey by surprise.

She is the founder and driving force behind Testigo Projects, an NGO that works with communities in Tanzania to bring them fresh water and permaculture training, so people can grow and sell crops for themselves.

The organisation, established in 2009, is also setting up schools and classrooms in remote villages for children and adults keen to improve their education and future job opportunities.

"Testigo is no longer just about me and my passion to try to help my Masai friends; Testigo has a life of its own," says Tracey, who gave up her Armani suits, six-figure lawyer salary and executive Hong Kong lifestyle after a soul-searching trip to the African nation in 2004.

"We're addressing so many of the [UN] Millennium Development Goals – water, nutrition, education, maternal and child health, environment and sustainability. And I've proven to the sceptics that I'm in there for the long run – I'm not going to run back to my corporate career!"

Running an NGO in Tanzania was not part of Tracey's career plan when she began her working life in Melbourne with degrees in economics and law from Monash University.

She joined KPMG as a tax accountant before moving to London to work for an international law firm ("It was very English – they had garden parties in the barrister's chambers").

Then Tracey was offered a position as a business development and marketing director with the biggest law firm in Asia, based in Hong Kong, earning the big bucks and living in a luxury flat overlooking the harbour. But most of her time was



spent flying across Asia, the US and Europe to generate new business for the law company.

"It was good for the wallet but bad for the soul. I pushed myself and pushed myself and after three years I had a meltdown," says Tracey frankly, adding that the aha-moment came after a life coach asked her questions about her life and she replied with, "I just don't want to face myself", and then I gasped..."

In response, Tracey escaped to Africa, a place she had long wanted to explore. She travelled alone, soaking up the landscapes, meeting the people and letting her mind wander, wondering what would come next.

During the last stage of a trip to Zanzibar she met a Masai man selling jewellery in the marketplace who was keen to improve his English and asked Tracey to stay in touch via email so he could practice. Tracey already had plans to return to Tanzania later that year and when her new friend, Lesaloy, invited her to visit his village, Longido, she kindly accepted.

She met Lesaloy's brother, Olengunin, and his wife, Namnyak, who is now one of her best friends, and attended a coming-of-age ceremony that went late into the evening ("When I needed to sleep, Lesaloy found me a mat and I slept in a hut with baby goats and puppies around me"). In between the songs, the dancing and her cross-cultural adventures, Tracey suddenly found a new purpose – raising AU\$35,000 to set up a fresh water supply for Lesaloy's village.

On her Australian return, Tracey spoke to businesses, community groups, schools and individuals about the needs of the struggling Masai communities in Tanzania and when fresh water arrived in the village of Longido, she founded Testigo Projects to continue helping the local communities.

"I could have earned the money in a few months but I want the energy behind this project to be because I've inspired people. My workaholic approach has been transferred to this," laughs



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Tracey, adding that working hands-on in Africa has given her a new sense of purpose, a new direction and has reignited the passion for life that she lost when consumed by the legal world.

She's determined to try and alleviate some of the struggles faced by Masai communities affected by drought, poverty, poor health and limited educational opportunities and explains that a recent three-year drought in Longido killed most of the livestock. It left villagers without income, food and the social status associated with owning cattle.

"About 90 per cent of the livestock died and that is the villager's wealth. There were suicides because they felt they had no hope," she says. >

*There's a  
whole world  
out there.*

PHOTOGRAPHY LAURA MORGAN



Tracey and permaculture trainees at the demo plot in Longido.



Tracey and her Masai husband Emanuel Saakai in the Dandenongs in Melbourne at their Australian commitment ceremony.



Tracey with permaculture trainees in Monduli in front of double dug beds.



Testigo Projects has now received Australian aid backing and has been supported by a raft of grants from respected philanthropic organisations. This has enabled the NGO to broaden its projects from supplying fresh water to look at projects that support nutrition, education, health and sustainability.

“I think the fact that I’m not from a development or aid background is good, because I just see what needs to be done and I do it,” says Tracey.

“It’s the approach I took in my corporate career when I changed industries and countries – I was able to look at things through fresh eyes instead of taking a standard textbook approach.”

Tracey spends most of her year in Arusha, Tanzania, returning to Melbourne to continue fundraising and raising awareness of Testigo Projects as needed. She has also found personal happiness in her new home after meeting her husband, Emanuel Saakai, a Masai humanitarian, in Longido through her charity work. Emanuel runs the not-for-profit Lengo Football Academy, for boys who would not otherwise be able to afford to play football and develop their sporting abilities.

“One of the boys is going to Austria for eye treatment and we’ve sent a number of boys to a sponsored 10-week stint with Raleigh International,” Tracey says proudly.

“Now we’re looking to get sponsorships so we can pay the coaches and also afford the travel so the boys can play away games. I’ve never been happier. I’m passionate about what I do again. I lost that for a while.” ■

+++ See for yourself at  
[TESTIGOAFRICA.ORG](http://TESTIGOAFRICA.ORG)  
[LENGOFOOTBALLACADEMY.COM](http://LENGOFOOTBALLACADEMY.COM)