

# Empowering Maasai communities *to farm for their future*

A chance meeting with a Maasai warrior proved life-changing for Tracey Sawyer. Now she herself, through the charity she founded, is changing lives for communities in Tanzania.

When she was growing up in Australia, Tracey Sawyer lived in a world of charity work, volunteering, and helping others. It is perhaps unsurprising that she should have chosen to start a career in law, and to set up and run a humanitarian charity.

However, her breadth of experience and the commitment she has shown to her causes go well beyond reasonable expectations. Today, Tracey trains Maasai communities and schools to harvest rainwater and grow vegetables sustainably through the charity Testigo Africa that she founded in Tanzania.

What started as drought relief has blossomed into wider community support in areas such as education and microenterprise, with the trained now becoming the trainers. “We facilitate and empower them, but the Maasai people make the magic,” she says.

Tracey graduated from Monash University, Melbourne, with a double degree in Law and Economics, with a major in Accountancy.



After qualifying as a lawyer, she volunteered at a community legal service before joining KPMG as a tax consultant.

Moving to London to work in product development at legal publisher Sweet & Maxwell, Tracey met legacy A&O banking lawyer and author Philip Wood. She says: “I got to know A&O through Philip and I was inspired to join the firm as a marketing manager in 1997.

“We were chatting one day when Philip said he knew of the perfect job for me, if only I were a lawyer. I told him I actually was, and I ended up moving from marketing to become a professional support lawyer (PSL) as the head of the Banking Information Office.”

During her three years at A&O, Tracey was struck by the firm’s collaborative culture and “very smart, helpful people.” She is still in touch with Philip and Sue Wisbey, who was his PA at the time and now works as a community investment manager at A&O Shearman.

## CONFIDENCE TO FLOURISH

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“Working at A&O gave me the confidence that I could take on any professional challenge, no matter how big or complex,” she says.

As if to prove it, she moved to Hong Kong as director of business development and marketing at global law firm Johnson Stokes & Master, followed by another BD role at White & Case in Hong Kong, before she returned to London to work at Monckton Chambers.

Tracey then moved back to a PSL role at HSBC London. Before she started, and to celebrate a milestone birthday, she decided on a memorable safari holiday in Kenya and a tour of Tanzania. It turned out to be the beginning of a whole new life for Tracey.

Just before heading home to London, she met a young Maasai named Lesaloy who was running a stall selling tourists beaded jewelry handmade by the women in his family. He was 28, the stage of life when young Maasai men are known as morani, or warriors. As a morani, his role was to protect his village, Longido. Lesaloy had learned English from a volunteer based in Longido and began chatting to Tracey about the Maasai way of life.

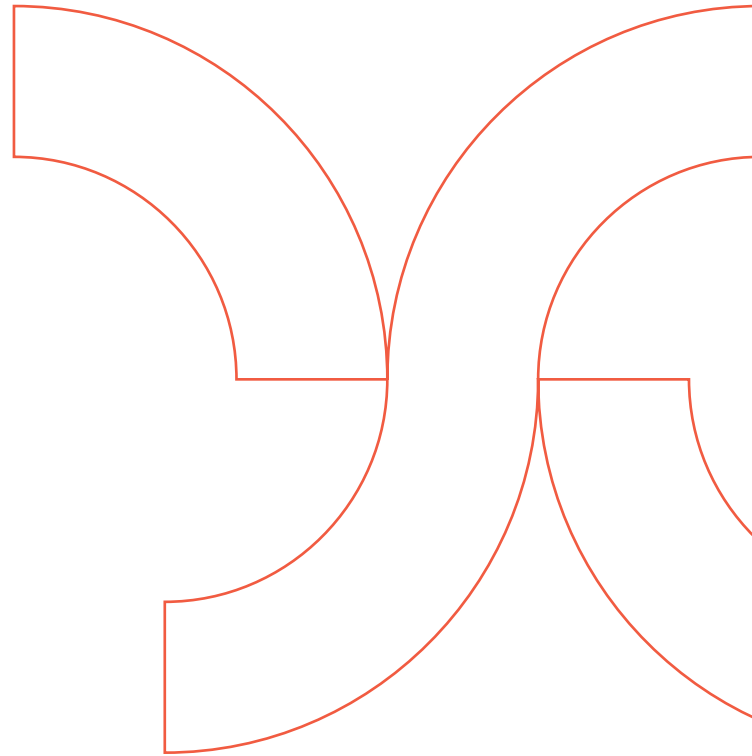
## THE INVITATION OF A LIFETIME

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“We exchanged email addresses, and I didn’t think much more about it, but when I arrived home, I had an email from Lesaloy inviting me to visit him and his family in Longido. I’d fallen in love with Tanzania, and I already knew I wanted to go back, so I responded to the invitation and four months later found myself at a Maasai ceremony and sleeping on the floor of a mud hut.”

The ceremony was an incredible experience for Tracey: “The singing and traditional rhythmic chanting was like nothing I’d ever experienced as I stood inside a circle of Maasai men with the women placing their handmade jewelry on me. I hardly slept as we celebrated day and night for days.”

That was 2004. Today, Tracey has her own hut and piece of land in Lesaloy’s village, and she calls his sister-in-law, Namnyak, her best friend of 20 years. “My heart opened when I met the Maasai people in Longido and it’s never closed. I felt like I’d come home. My little patch of land is heaven. I can see three mountains from there, including Mount Kilimanjaro.”



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*“With our intensive four-month training, we’ve taught Maasai women, men, and school students how to grow their own food for the first time with start-up kits of tools and seeds. They’re now eating and making a profit from their home-grown produce.”*

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## DEVASTATED BY DROUGHT

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Despite the beauty of the landscape, conditions there are harsh. Drought is devastating for the Maasai, whose livelihoods and diet traditionally depend on rearing livestock. When Tracey heard from Lesaloy that a local water project had fallen through, she knew she had to help.

In 2009, Tracey founded Testigo Africa to support the people she had first met in Longido five years earlier. She was working back in Melbourne as a PSL for National Australia Bank and left her job to go back to Tanzania. “It was so sad to see the effects of the drought,” she says. “The carcasses of cows and sheep were everywhere as 90% of Longido’s livestock had died.”

Tracey returned to Australia to raise money for Testigo full-time and study for a master’s degree in Commerce, Philanthropy and Social Investment at Swinburne University of Technology, where she won an award for the highest-achieving student.

Through her professor, she met a philanthropist who invested AUD10,000 in Testigo, enabling Tracey to undertake a water project for Longido, operating as CEO of Testigo from Tanzania.

## TRANSFORMING LIVES

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Fifteen years on, the charity has transformed the lives, diets, and health of multiple Maasai communities and schools throughout Tanzania, working in partnership with the indigenous people to tailor projects to their specific needs. “Through Testigo, 15,000 Maasai have access to clean drinking water, thanks to our water rehabilitation and pipeline projects,” says Tracey.

Drought forced many Maasai to abandon their traditional diets of meat and dairy and become predominantly vegetarian. In support, Testigo runs permaculture projects to teach self-sufficient sustainable agricultural practices that support the local natural ecosystems. “With our intensive four-month training, we’ve taught Maasai women, men, and school students how to grow their own food for the first time with start-up kits of tools and seeds,” she says. “They’re now eating and making a profit from their home-grown produce.”

Innovative techniques have proved a success, including sack gardens—turning empty sacks from the market into mini gardens—and double-dug beds that involve rearranging the layers of soil to release nutrients.

## LONG TERM IMPACT

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Groups of growers are now selling their organic vegetables to restaurants and have set up their own wholesalers too.

“The ripple effect is incredible,” says Tracey. “Our school garden projects teach the students about permaculture and growing their own food. Children pass on these techniques at home so their parents no longer have to buy vegetables at prices they can’t afford. Now their vegetable microbusinesses are supporting their families financially and providing them with nourishing diets from their own gardens.”

The trained are also becoming the trainers, with groups of women introducing other nearby communities to growing their own food sustainably.

Beyond farming, Testigo is also sponsoring Maasai school and vocational students. One student qualified as a lawyer, thanks to Testigo, and is now advising the Maasai on land rights. He is also working to protect girls from forced marriages.

Another student was supported through medical school, joined the Flying Doctors and is now an obstetric surgeon.

## TRACEY SAWYER

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Founder & CEO  
Testigo Africa

A&O: 1997-2000

Reconnect with Tracey Sawyer at [aoshearman.com/alumni](https://aoshearman.com/alumni)



## BACK TO HER ROOTS

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After living in Tanzania for more than a decade, Tracey went back to Australia in March 2020 to spend more time with her elderly parents. Going back to her legal roots, she worked at the Director of Public Prosecutions in Darwin, where she implemented a new knowledge management strategy, drawing on her experience all those years before at A&O.

Recently, she's been working on consultancy projects to empower indigenous Aboriginal communities, including a project with the Northern Territory government's water department.

Tracey confesses to being a workaholic because she is so passionate about what she does. “When I can, I enjoy very long hikes, camping, and audiobooks, because I love stories about people. In fact, I'm writing my own book, telling my story of what the Maasai taught me.”

Her fundraising for Testigo now includes charitable adventure trips to Tanzania, taking groups on safari to visit villages participating in Testigo projects, and leading them on expeditions climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. She says: “People join our trips to support Testigo and have life-changing experiences that tours don't provide, and money can't buy.”