



STORY KATE BROADHURST

# *Sisters are doing* IT FOR OTHERS

ISIS, THE OBSESSION OF SOUTH COAST SISTERS, AUDETTE AND LEONIE EXEL, IS AN EXTRAORDINARY EXAMPLE OF HOW DIFFERENTLY WOMEN CAN APPROACH THE WORLD OF BUSINESS.

While trekking through the mountains of Nepal a decade ago, Audette Exel had an epiphany. It wasn't the high altitude and majesty of the mountains that changed her life. It was the appalling level of child poverty and sickness all around that inspired her and close friend, Sharon A. Beesley to start a charity and a revolutionary way to fund its base-line costs.

Breaking the mould from all directions, international banker Audette and lawyer Sharon saw the possibilities of combining a finance and insurance consultancy (ISIS Limited) with a charitable foundation, (The ISIS Foundation, run by Leonie) which would work together hand in hand.

Brought up by parents with a passion for social justice, Audette and Leonie always had the drive to do something to help. "Our father was a war correspondent in Vietnam and our family philosophy was always to contribute as much as we could." Although she had spent years working in the international money world in Sydney, Hong Kong and Bermuda, Audette found herself "seriously thinking about retraining as a doctor" until she realised that with her training and contacts she could start a company that "could put thousands of doctors on the ground – not just one".

"Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and charities often struggle to stay afloat and most of the donations get used up in administration and staff salaries etc., so we thought, why not create a company specifically to become the money 'engine' for a charity. You can be the nicest person on the planet and run an NGO, but if you don't have the funding, you're always going to be limited in what you can do."



**Above, from top to bottom:** The ISIS Foundation obtained custody of these children in August 2006 after they had been trafficked from Humla. They are now living in a home with 13 other girls, going to school, and healing from the past few years. A young girl at an ISIS-funded literacy class in Humla, North West Nepal. Two Humli boys from a children's home in Kathmandu. In 2005 ISIS funded the purchase of bunk beds and furniture, enabling the home to support 20 more children from this impoverished region. Humla is just 'over the mountain' from Tibet and these boys are ethnically Tibetan.

**Clockwise from top right:** Martin, Marvin and Mildred, the first triplets ever born at the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit that ISIS funds and supports at Kivoko Hospital, Uganda. Audette with mothers and their children at the Women's Foundation, a shelter for abused and battered women in Nepal. Leo and a little one at Kivoko Hospital in Uganda. There are over two million AIDS orphans in Uganda, and this little guy is one of them. A mother checks on her baby in an incubator in the NICU. ISIS collects donated medical supplies and equipment from hospitals in Seattle, USA, and ships containers to the hospital in rural Uganda.

Audette left her job as the Managing Director of Bermuda Commercial Bank (the youngest woman ever to run a bank anywhere in the world) and she and Sharon A. Beesley laid their reputations on the line for their new and untried project. They bought and renovated an old Bermuda bakery as the headquarters. "At first it was two women and a dog. The locals thought we were eccentric, the clients thought we were crazy." They knew they had the experience and kudos to offer high quality finance services to a niche market. Normally a percentage of business is taken as profit, but the women put their profit straight into running the base-line for the charitable foundation. "At the beginning if there wasn't the money to go into the foundation, we didn't take salaries. It was always the *raison d'être* of the business. It exists purely to fund the charity."

The ISIS Foundation – the charity arm of ISIS, is registered as a charity in Bermuda and in the UK and is soon to be registered in Australia. Leonie, who is general manager of the charity, also has decades of experience in her field, having spent her career in the non-profit

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sector. In particular she ran a specialised disability employment service for people who had psychiatric disabilities and then her own business training and advising non-government organisations. "One of the issues is that NGOs usually operate in a different world to big finance companies. They see things through very different eyes – and speak different languages." The women's unique contacts, combination of skills and close relationship mean it works well. Leonie laughs about the sharp learning curve for both of them when they started working together: "but I knew we were getting somewhere when I started using words like 'basis point' and she started talking about 'capacity building'. "We have the same modus operandi – we both want to maximise results." says Audette. "We do disagree. We fight and we get over it. Then we get to fabulous conclusions."

The long list of fabulous conclusions that have been turned into practical aid and training projects is both astonishing and humbling. The focus of the charity has always been to fund education and health care for children – and to do it in a self-sustaining way so that health and education is built to last from the fundamentals.

The first big project was in the remote and poor Humla region of Nepal, which borders with Tibet and is 21 days' walk from the nearest road. ISIS works through and with local organisations and goes village by village to ascertain primary health care needs and deliver long-term, sustainable aid. They have funded solar power, greenhouses and solar driers, safe drinking-water systems, smokeless indoor stoves and pit latrines, immunisation and literacy programs. Villagers learned hygiene, sanitation and nutrition (the mums learned how to make 'super-porridge'). ISIS has a policy of always employing locals where possible and training the trainers, thereby improving the chances of long-term, long-lasting success.

Their philosophy is also to do extensive research. "We engaged an anthropologist fluent in Nepali to make sure we were working within the existing culture. For example, she discovered that the smokeless stoves we were distributing weren't being used properly: the women were leaving the fire doors open because they wanted to see the glowing embers,



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MOST ASTONISHING OF ALL PERHAPS IS THAT, AFTER YEARS OF NEGOTIATIONS, THE ISIS FOUNDATION HAS RECENTLY TAKEN CUSTODY OF 136 CHILDREN RESCUED FROM CHILD TRAFFICKERS IN KATHMANDU.



letting smoke out into the home and defeating the whole purpose. So we changed the stove rather than trying to change the behaviour."

In Kathmandu they fund an education trust that educates 100 children a year; they fund medical supplies for a monastery health clinic that treats over 5,000 patients a year and support the grassroots Women's Foundation that shelters and feeds numerous poor, trafficked and outcast women and their children.

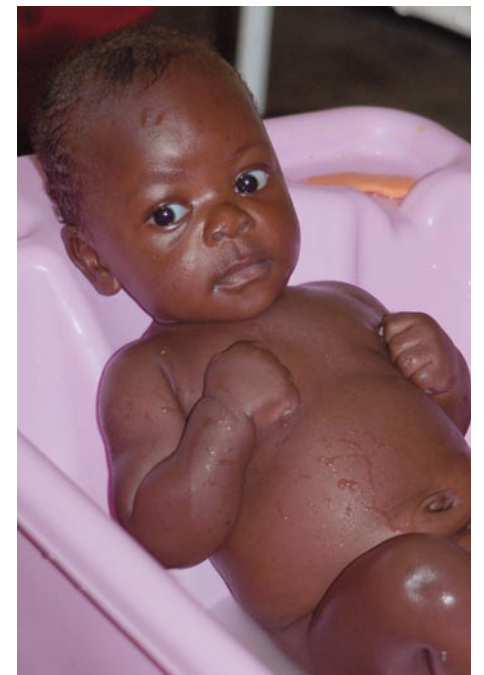
Most astonishing of all perhaps is that, after years of negotiations, the ISIS Foundation has recently taken custody of 136 (mostly Humla) children rescued from child traffickers in Kathmandu. Leonie had to literally deal with child traffickers to secure the guardianship of these children. In just a few months they have pulled together a miracle, housing them in ten 'family like' foster homes with local pastoral staff, providing everything a child could need to really succeed in life, from food and clothing to school fees and psychological counselling (some of these children have been through unimaginable abuse); from fun and games to a loving, safe environment. They are also working to find the kids' families in the mountains so they might be repatriated when the civil war is over.

In Uganda, ISIS has numerous projects going too, from paying for a 4WD mobile health clinic to building and fully funding a neonatal intensive care unit attached to Kiwoko, a bush hospital where trained nurses and doctors see around 400 babies a year, most of whom wouldn't have survived without them. The Ebenezer Club is a home for around 30 street kids (there are estimated to be around 10,000 malnourished, often abused street children in Uganda).

Chatting in the sitting room of their mum's home in Mollymook, a world away from their charges in Africa and Nepal, the sisters are open, warm and engaging and it's like talking to old friends. The banter veers from the deadly serious, shocking and painful things they see (some things too shocking for me to write about), to unbridled hilarity and fast, sibling wit. Leonie in particular has a wicked sense of humour and you can see that you'd need one to get through some of those experiences and stay so upbeat.

The intense passion for their work, which consumes their whole lives, is palpable. "When we finally negotiated the children from the traffickers," says Leonie, "I allowed myself about five hours of joy and then just got back on with it." Audette continues: "The foundation is a hungry baby. We both have a constant feeling that we are not making enough difference." But they are. They have to be. ■

[www.isis.bm](http://www.isis.bm)  
[www.kathmandukidsclub.com](http://www.kathmandukidsclub.com)



Clockwise from top left: Leo and Khadijah, a two year old girl with AIDS at the Kiwoko Hospital in 2005. Three mothers at feeding time in the NICU, Uganda. The hats, booties and blankets are knitted by donors worldwide, including a group from Mollymook. Another happy patient at the NICU in Uganda. Maneesh Batra, an ISIS volunteer and medical specialist (a paediatrician and neonatologist), runs a training program for the staff. Christine Otai, the amazing woman in charge of the Neonatal ICU in Uganda. She comes from Gulu, in war-torn Northern Uganda. A war survivor herself, she is now helping to save hundreds of babies each year.