

Radical generosity and the art of the possible

How an act of 'radical generosity' is bringing the stories of one of the world's most remote communities to the wider world and showcasing the art of the possible.

Nicole Richards, Oct 2019

So often when we speak about philanthropy's biggest gifts, we get stuck talking about money. Million-dollar or even [billion-dollar donations](#) are increasingly the only types of gifts that attract mainstream headlines, which in turn reaffirm the prevailing narrative that philanthropy is only for the ultra-wealthy.

Former [Philanthropy Leader of the Year](#), Audette Exel AO, has never been one to blindly accept a prevailing narrative. For 21 years she's been bridging worlds with the Adara Group, using a business for purpose model that keeps pushing boundaries.

The [Adara Group](#) consists of three parts: two corporate advisory businesses, Adara Advisors and Adara Partners (both certified B Corporations) which, along with philanthropic support, fund the work of Adara Development. The latter specialises in maternal, newborn and child health and remote community development in Uganda and Nepal.

Tenacity and an inability to take no for an answer have taken Exel and her team of local in-country specialists on a journey that has at times been steep with learning, adversity and lashings of humility. Despite the challenges, Exel's personal narrative remains one of joy.

"I was determined to go to the world's most remote places and try to understand how I could be helpful," Exel says.

"Going to Humla, one of the most remote regions in Nepal for the first time was like being transported to a different planet. I remember walking for five days to get to Yalbang village. You had the beauty of the people, the majesty of the Himalayas but also the absolute confrontation of the day-to-day battle to survive: mums carrying their children for days and days on their back to get medical treatment; the battle with the cold and with the formidable environment every day; the need to get up every day and find food for your family. I knew that change was possible, but it was going to take decades.

"It was joyous and uplifting and terrifying all at the same time."

Adara's work in Nepal is the subject of the documentary **Big Mountains, Big Dreams** which premiered this month in Melbourne and Sydney.

The 27-minute documentary, which was two years in the making, features what is thought to be the world's first aerial footage of Chala, the most remote village in Nepal's most remote region.

Filmmaker Robert Zuill's breathtaking footage captures both the cinematic sweep of the region's inhospitable mountains and the perseverance of the people who live there.

Exel describes the Bermuda-based filmmaker's "radical act of generosity" to travel unobtrusively with Adara's Nepali team and create a documentary film as one of the most valuable gifts the organisation has ever received.

The culmination of thousands of hours of work, including 3,500 video clips, more than 80 interviews and six months' worth of editing, *Big Mountains Big Dreams* showcases the ability of local communities to determine the solutions to the challenges they face.

"Adara never does any project without first consulting with the locals," Zuill explains. "The locals are expected to help plan the project, install it, and then run it. Adara has taken this system to the point that it has no westerners working in Nepal at all.

"I made this movie because I feel it is vitally important to get the word out that economic development can work well and explain how to make it happen."

Told through the voices and lived experiences of local people, *Big Mountains Big Dreams* includes the story of Angjuk Lama, who grew up in Humla, was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship and returned as Adara's Nepal Programme Manager.

"Lots of NGOs come to Humla for five years and then leave," Lama says of the region that is home to 60,000 people. "Being there for 21 years is unheard of."

"Over that time there have been many changes here that have improved health, hygiene and nutrition in a massive way. But the most important change, I think, is our education project in Humla. It's an amazing achievement to have 100 percent enrolment and more girls in school than boys. Parents have realised the importance of education and that's why they are making efforts to send all their kids including girls to school."

One such school is Yalbang School which was ranked Nepal's fifth-best school (out of more than 35,000) for its educational results in 2017 and named the country's best remote education.

In a post-screening Q&A, Pralhad Kumar Dhakal, Country Director for Adara in Nepal, explained that working to provide education in one of the world's most remote areas presents unique challenges.

"To build a school that's so remote you have to carry every piece of material manually or on horse for days or weeks and that is a logistical challenge that also impacts costs too," Dhakal said.

"For example, a bag of cement costs \$5 but to transport that bag to remote areas can cost as much as \$100. Added to that you have uncertain weather which obstructs projects and transportation."

Acclaimed Australian writer, Lily Brett, who attended the Melbourne screening along with fellow author, Kaz Cooke, called *Big Mountains Big Dreams* a "remarkable piece of communication".

"It makes you cry and makes you have such hope at the same time and very few stories can do that," Brett said.

"Philanthropy can be a very abstract notion - people admire it, but most people don't know what can be achieved. This documentary shows what can be achieved and that's globally crucial."

"It's the villagers themselves who are changing these villages," Exel adds. "It's the village that's deciding and leading and lifting.

"I think we've reached a tipping point when it comes to impact – it's not just service delivery and knowledge sharing but telling the stories that show people what's possible, stories that show unity and change and the astonishing people we get to work with who are creating that change with quiet support from Adara.

“Amazing things are possible even in communities that are many weeks walk from a road. We should never underestimate human beings.”