

Oxonians at large

Alicia Clegg meets the founders of diverse social enterprises, two athletes and a Maori specialist



Rob Breare (left) and Will Snell

Alumni with appetite to beat poverty through work

Mentoring enterprise set up by former Oxonians brings welcome boost to Kenyan business

Will Snell

Christ Church 1998

Rob Breare

St Catherine's 1997

If you would like to use your skills to combat poverty, Skills Venture, a social enterprise that helps Kenyan small businesses create jobs and economic prosperity, could be your opportunity.

Will Snell (Christ Church 1998) and Rob Breare (St Catherine's 1997) founded rural schools charity Harambee Schools Kenya as students after taking gap years in Kenya. Now, after spells in the Civil Service and marketing, they have created Skills Venture, a mentoring enterprise that pairs business people from industrialised nations with up-and-coming Kenyan entrepreneurs. "We thought there was scope to use the

skills that people have built up at work, without requiring them to spend a year or six months with an NGO," says Snell.

Most Skills Venture entrepreneurs in Kenya are successful business owners. But having got their enterprise going, they now face unfamiliar challenges, such as developing a strategy to crack new markets. The mentor's job is to offer tips to help them move forward.

Skills Venture assignments typically last two weeks and include opportunities to explore the Kenyan countryside. Most mentors have financed their trips from their own pockets, but Snell and Breare hope to persuade employers to sponsor their staff as part of their professional development. "It's not a scheme where people sit behind a computer screen, teaching spreadsheet literacy," Snell says. "It's about chats over a cup of coffee, exploring ideas and unlocking talent." www.skillsventure.com
www.hsk.org.uk

Race against the odds

Nikki Emerson

Magdalen 2006



Watching the Beijing Olympics from Stoke

Mandeville National Spinal

Injuries Centre, lacrosse and modern pentathlon Blue Nikki Emerson (Magdalen 2006) made up her mind that if she could no longer do the sports she adored, she would do whichever sports were open to her. "At first, I felt, 'I can't walk, I can't do anything.' But then I thought, 'Actually, I can play wheelchair basketball, I can play wheelchair tennis,'" says Emerson, who broke her back in a car crash at the end of her second year at Oxford. "Sport was really what got me through the mental side of it."

Two years later, having graduated in neuroscience and psychology, Emerson has set her sights on wheelchair racing at the London Paralympic Games. Long-term, she has her eye on a career with the International Olympic Committee, but for the moment, her goal is 2012. "As a wheelchair racer, you are very low to the ground," she explains. "Every time you go down a hill at some ridiculous speed you get an adrenalin rush. It feels pretty amazing."

www.wheelpower.org.uk

Art imitating life's big issues

Alex Harvie

LMH 1988



Working on the art installations for the Millennium Dome

introduced writer Alex Harvie, née Madinaveitia (LMH 1988), to her future husband, artist Gregor Harvie. Now they have formed a creative partnership that opens up the big social issues of our day. "We wanted to use art to help promote deep thinking," says Alex.

Their first collaboration, Gene Meme, tackled the issue of rising world population through an exhibition in June at the Crypt Gallery in London. Designed to "pose questions about what should be done" rather than offer solutions, Gene Meme has a very tangible follow-on. With the proceeds of every picture sold, the charity Street Child Africa is providing a year's apprenticeship to a homeless child in Ghana.

The couple's next project will tackle Alzheimer's, another contemporary issue that threatens to engulf the world. Artistically, says Alex, the 'forgetting' that sufferers of Alzheimer's experience links to another form of forgetting – the 'collective forgetting' of the lessons from history that Gene Meme explores.

www.gandaharvie.com

www.streetchildafrica.org.uk