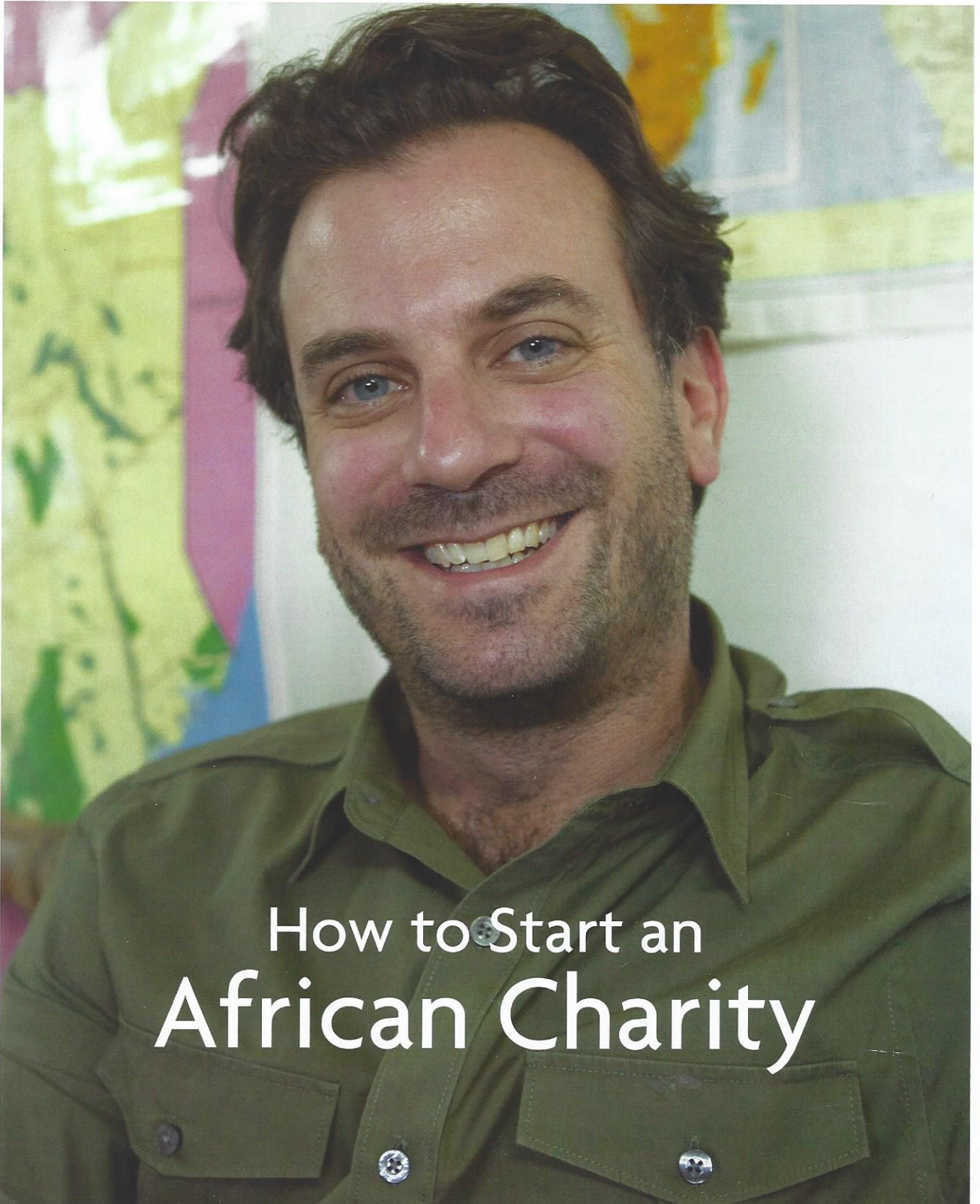


FIRST PERSON

BY BRADLEY BRODER

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF BRADLEY BRODER



How to Start an African Charity

Seven years ago, *Lifestyles Magazine* published its first (and only) article about why this idealistic, bleeding-heart, ex-Peace Corps volunteer had recently started a nonprofit educational organization in Africa. For those of you who have patiently held your breath for the follow-up story, your wait is over.

TO refresh your memory, in 2006 I founded the Kenya Education Fund (KEF), which was my response to the ineffective (at best) and harmful (at worst) aid work I witnessed while living in the Kenya bush between 1999 and 2001. Unlike the private sector, the “social sector” seemed to operate on a reverse meritocracy, where failure to improve African lives was rewarded with more donors and larger grants.

As a former Peace Corps volunteer, I felt guilty by association and found myself at a crossroads: I could spend my life persuading others that foreign charities do more harm than good. Or I could start my own charity by leveraging my understanding of what makes the others so ineffective. Can you guess which road I chose?

The inspiration for starting KEF was equal parts *tikkun olam* and kismet. It happened in grad school when a friend handed me a \$100 bill before I departed on a research trip to Kenya. Naively I asked, “What’s this for?” He smiled wide and patted me on the back. “That’s for you to figure out. I trust you’ll find someone in Kenya who can really use it.”

That bill burned a hole in my pocket for three weeks until my former neighbor—a Kenyan mama whose kids helped me learn Swahili during the Peace Corps—cried to me about her inability to pay her daughter’s school fees. Without hesitation, I reached into my pocket and handed her the cash. That girl would later be known as the Kenya Education Fund’s very first beneficiary, a Muslim girl helped by the *tzedakah* of a Long Island Jew.

The story of the Muslim and the Jew quickly spread among my family and friends, inspiring more gifts that were used to enroll more Kenyan children in school. Things quickly progressed. KEF became a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization faster than you can say “tax deduction.” It was as though anyone who ever read *The Economist* wanted to be part of an African charity start-up, so they lined up with pro-bono *this* and donated *that*. Random people would thank me for “saving the world,” always wanting to put me in touch with their relative who “also spent time in Africa.” Heck, this magazine wrote an article about me when we only had 110 students! Seven years later—and as a result of all this goodwill—KEF is now the largest noninstitutional scholarship provider in Kenya, having awarded more than 1,500 educational scholarships in a country without free public schooling.*

The Kenya Education Fund—with its focus on helping people acquire the knowledge and skills they need to escape pov-

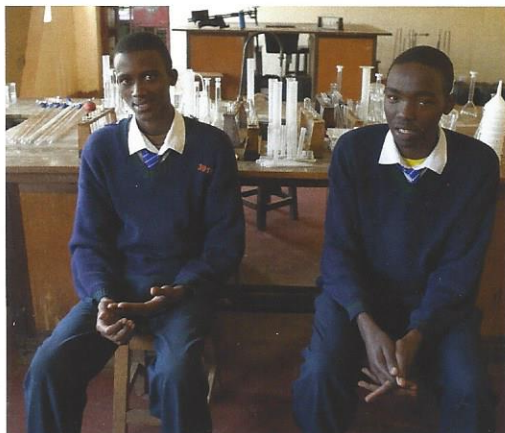
erty—is simple but effective. Our scholarships give people access to education that empowers them to be agents of their own development. KEF programs are actually a reflection of Kenya’s ever-changing educational needs as Kenyans define them. As a consequence, KEF is left to grow at a rate that is dictated by the merit of our mission rather than by my personal goals or vision. Though this “passive leadership” style drives my board members crazy, it is what sets KEF apart from other charities. I refuse to answer the preposterous question “Where do you see KEF in five years?” One board member scolded me, saying, “If you don’t know where you want to go, any road will take you there!” Reflecting on the epic failures of countless African charities and their obsession with the five-year vision, I couldn’t disagree more. Besides, who ever stays on the same road for five years?

Change is necessary. The first iteration of KEF helped primary school students leave the cheap and overcrowded public schools for higher-quality, more-expensive private schools. Before long, we realized that primary school students were unable to transition into high school, where costs rose exponentially, so we shifted our focus to help them. We then found that the Kenyan system of educating by rote memorization left many of our graduates unprepared for life after high school, so we began offering life skills and career readiness workshops to all KEF scholars. A few years later, the calls for university and vocational school assistance could no longer be ignored, so we added them, too.

KEF’s ability to identify and respond to the vicissitudes of the Kenyan educational

*In 2003, Kenya began to offer universal primary education. Although this has allowed most Kenyan children to access some form of primary schooling, the burden of purchasing school uniforms, textbooks, and school meals still prevents some students from attending.

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landscape also opened us up to two incredible opportunities for scaling. In 2011, the Nomadic Kenyan Children's Educational Fund (NKCEF) proposed a merger of our organizations, instantly doubling the size of our program, donor base, and board of directors. I was thrilled to now support so many nomadic Kenyans, whose culture presents extraordinary challenges to education. Incredibly, one of these nomadic students excelled as a result of our scholarship and became the first Masai girl to ever attend Harvard as an undergraduate.

Three years later, we were approached again, this time by the Children of Kibera Foundation (CoKF)—a scholarship fund for students from Nairobi's biggest slum. We consolidated our operations with CoKF in 2014, inheriting hundreds of brilliant scholars and faithful donors. No five-year plan could have ever predicted this.

My grandparents were Holocaust survivors who were not afraid to talk about it. From a very young age, I would listen to their horrifying memories of life (and mostly death) in the camps. Their stories of man's cruelty toward other men are forever etched in my core like the crooked blue numbers tattooed carelessly on their soft, sagging forearms. There are also incredible stories of people in the camps who risked their lives to help my grandparents survive. There will always be injustice in the world, just as there will always be people to stand up against it. I would not be here today if it were not for their bravery. That is why when I stood at that crossroads of starting a charity or fighting the status quo, I chose a life of helping others. **LM**

