

Sebastian Wahl, Taylor Benson and the Potter's Hand Foundation

Sebastian Wahl, known and beloved by us all as one of the more swashbuckling SMAC-heads in our ranks, is not one for escorting wayward Amazonian frogs safely across the roads in his adoptive home of Peru. Not that he doesn't sympathise with their death-inducing plight, you understand; he simply believes that better use can be put to his charitable inclinations.

Or should that be, *the Orlion Group's* charitable inclinations. Sebastian and his father, Klaus, established the gold mining company in 2008 with a view to exploiting Peruvian reserves, before moving the company's headquarters there on a permanent basis. Ever-keen to avoid the tar-brush of the corporate ne'er-do-well (a breed that has embraced South America with selfsame wholehearted vigour as your average Nazi fugitive), the father and son duo have gone to great pains to fashion a company with altogether more touchy-feely designs. Thus, they have stockpiled a number of strategic weapons to assail the negative, anti-environmental connotations of their industry of focus. This includes a battery of regional planners, geographers, economists and agricultural experts to promote a more joined up, long term approach to land-use planning beyond the company's activities, thereby engendering cordial and enduring relationships with local communities.

Which brings us back to our Seb and his frog-dodging ways. As part of their refreshingly sane approach to business, he and Klaus are committed to supporting *deserving* charitable endeavours in what remains, despite what the polished macroeconomic picture might suggest, an overwhelmingly poverty-stricken country. Note the stress on *deserving*; in these global warming-crazed times, environmental charities are ten-a-penny and then some. Though these undoubtedly perform a sterling service in ensuring the safe passage of our amphibian chums, Sebastian is a great and sincere believer in assisting the true hod-carriers of our planet's future: the little 'uns.

This in mind, he had long been on the lookout for a worthy cause that would fulfil this remit: of enabling and empowering Peruvian children to make the best of themselves, each other, the country, and maybe even the world. So it was that he stumbled onto the path and into the story (as he would put it) of Taylor Benson: self-proclaimed "missionary, cowboy, sailor and adventurer," and a good deal more than your average American retiree.

Taylor, at 67 years of age and complete with prodigious mane of grizzled hair, exuberant beard, and a penchant for kerchief and Stetson combos, looks every inch a good ol' boy rather than the New England born, Florida bred missionary he actually is. The country of Peru first appeared on his radar in 2003 when he fostered a boy from that country, an experience which part-inspired him to join the first of a string of missions to the Andean nation with Medical Ministry International. He quickly found that he "couldn't stay away", and his mind duly turned to the nutritional supplement that he has now been taking for thirteen years; Taylor is quick to admit that, in common with a great many Americans, he was less than careful with what he bundled down his

gullet in his past life; now, however, he is “the only healthy one in my family.” He knew that the supplement producer, Reliv, ran a charitable foundation that aimed to tackle malnutrition in needy communities the world over, and was quick to spot applicability for Peru.

Though the foundation was happy to supply Taylor with its product, it was on the proviso that he take full charge of bringing it into Peru, and he launched into his adventure on something of a wing and a prayer. He took early retirement in 2006, and relocated to Peru in February of the following year with “no money, no Spanish, really no way to bring this product into the country at all.”

In 2007 he registered his newly-formed organizational vehicle, the Potter’s Hand Foundation, and spent his first year treading water in the deep end: “doors opened, doors closed.” In logistical terms, negotiating the minefield of Peru’s arcane customs regulations was scarcely a prospect that Taylor relished. To his great delight, however, Peruvian Consulate officials in Miami agreed with one deft bureaucratic sleight of hand to accept the consignments as charitable imports. Four years on, he enjoys the kind of unblemished customs record that would be the envy of most conventional commercial operators in Peru.

Taylor then faced the daunting task of shouldering import fees and internal distribution costs on his US social security retirement pension: a payout scarcely means tested for running an international charity. Heaving his supplements around the country’s unforgiving road network on hitched rides and public buses in various states of disrepair, he began to draw upon grassroots civil and faith-based contacts as a means of gaining access to needy children.

His first distribution program involved 32 HIV/AIDS orphans in the city of Lima. Taylor was propelled onward by the changes he saw effected, and operations grew exponentially, “more than I envisioned in the beginning,” to the point where the Potter’s Hand Foundation now impacts close to 500 children divided among sixteen projects in six of Peru’s geographically diverse administrative *departamentos*.

What sort of transformations do the supplements bring about? Taylor says that in more extreme cases, such as those of the HIV/AIDs children who had been receiving no prior medical or dietary assistance, the difference can be seen in a week. Beyond that, “These children are not only surviving, they’re thriving....it’s also nutrition, education, and opportunity for the children. Children are the future. What we have is something so simple and yet so powerful, and safe, that it does change lives. First thing we notice everywhere around the world is the kid’s aren’t lethargic any more, they have more energy, they’re starting to get healthier, and their minds are getting sharper. They do better at school, and to me that equates with better educational opportunities for the future.”

Taylor compliments the nutritional products with water purification systems donated by Rotary International, thus ensuring the safety, and part of the simplicity, he talks about: of allowing the children to take the supplements with something so elementarily life-sustaining as clean, drinkable water.

It is exactly this unconditional, unpretentious simplicity that renders the Potter's Hand much of its immediate, arresting appeal to the onlooker. Taylor describes himself as "a messenger, a seed-planter" and his Christian motivations are profound, though there is nothing holier-than-thou about his demeanour. "Who am I to come down here and tell them how to live? My life was a mess before." He doesn't say so in as many words, but his role is essentially one of leading by example, of letting his actions do the talking.

These actions are principally rooted in time, and lots of it. Taylor makes it plain that he is committed for the long haul, and woe betide the benighted fool who deigns to call this an old timer's retirement project. He is visibly energized by his work, operating on the kind of schedule that would make much younger men wince. "I'm still young; I'm in this for 20 years or more. You have to retire to something, not just sit down on a couch and watch TV. I can be 88 and still grow, even if other hands and feet are doing the work."

Clearly, then, he is not a man in any kind of a hurry, and time is a notion that is intrinsic to his vision of serving. On a logistical level, his projects require ongoing monitoring and follow-up (day-to-day administration is entrusted to local coordinators such as pastors and teachers), but the permanent, long-term changes that he seeks to engender go beyond physical wellbeing; relationship building, continuity, and, ultimately, love, are pivotal. "I feel a responsibility and a desire to be personally connected with the people."

These long-standing relationships are not, he hastens to add, about making subsidy junkies of the children. "[This is] not a welfare program by any stretch." He talks of helping those who want to be helped, of aiding "children with a spark" in multifarious forms. He cites, for example, a Peruvian-American foundation that provides educational opportunities for underprivileged children and hopes to partner with it by acting as a kind of head-hunter for deserving candidates.

Fundamentally, though, he talks about choice, and this theme is as central a leitmotif as that of time. "Children need to know that they are responsible for their own lives, but they need to make the right choices, to understand their potential, [to gain] self-respect [and] educational opportunities." In another of the rare glimpses he provides of his own empirical investment, he suggests that he learned of the importance of choices the hard way. "If you don't perceive a choice, you just live what you live. I used to be like that. I didn't know what it meant to be a father. My dad couldn't teach me to be a better husband or father, so when the time came for those things to come along for me, it was all by experiment. And that's not right, because you make a lot of bad choices that way." His dream scenario, if resources were no object, would be to support children from around the age of three right through pre-school and primary levels. Thereafter, children would ideally have come to value

good nutrition, and the element of choice would enter the equation: of whether to sustain sound dietary habits of their own volition.

Of future ambitions, there is no shortage. Taylor's creative output is prodigious and gloriously ambitious to the point where he is often unravelled by the limitations of his own two legs and 24-hour days. As he puts it, "I work every day in faith and it keeps outgrowing me, and I need to catch up." As the only representative of Reliv's foundation in South America, he sees no reason why distribution should be confined by Peruvian borders, and has plans afoot to exploit contacts in Honduras and start operations there. A kind of philanthropic expansionist, his dream is of one day overseeing a pan-Latin American distribution network and of doing his bit to improve child health and wellbeing in the greater region.

Like all great expansionists, however, he can only be stretched so thinly; with his constant to-ing and fro-ing between projects and nights of sleep stolen from church floors, his is a routine every bit as punishing as that of even the most devoutly populist of presidents. And while his indefatigability is almost spooky, there are clear limitations to his impromptu growth strategy: "Right now it's just me, and I'm getting swamped."

He envisions several possible means of logistical redress; a 4x4, for example, is his holy grail, allowing him to "be able to spend quality time...not just say, 'here's your product' and go" and extend the Foundation's reach into parts of the Peruvian jungle that even the cartographers have barely penetrated. He could use a secretary to keep his affairs in order, and, whisper it, even speaks of having a living stipend to draw on someday. Not that traversing the Andes in Armani suits would quite be his thing, but it would allow him to pursue certain unprogrammed spin-offs, such as funding the university fees of one 15 year old girl with whom he has built a long-term relationship. And, despite being a man who seems to have located his own particular elixir of youth, he acknowledges that, someday, he will have to hand over the reigns to a successor.

Now, even though our Sebastian may be too busy tending to his own affairs to perform that precise role, he sees in Taylor and the Potter's Hand Foundation something of infinitely more value than Pelican crossings for frogs. And if you do as well, then he'd love to hear from you.