

God, I decided, had saved me for a purpose. Through my new faith, I would find that purpose.

The Vietnamese government finally relented and allowed me to continue my education, this time in Cuba. It was there that I met my husband—and decided that I would finally escape the clutches of the communist government.

I told no one, just bided my time. And one day, I saw my chance.

It was 1992. My husband and I were returning from our honeymoon in Moscow, and the plane needed to refuel in Canada. I looked out the plane window at the wide open spaces of Gander, Newfoundland. We knew nothing of this country except that it was cold—and free. That was enough for me. I had never felt so scared in my life—or so strong. With pounding hearts, we left our bags on the plane and never turned back.

I came here to get away from Vietnam, from the war, and from my life as The Girl in the Picture. I wanted to make my life quiet. It did not work out that way, but that's okay. I have found something else—something better. I have found my purpose. I travel and speak out to tell people that war is bad, that tolerance and forgiveness are good, that our real enemy is anger and bitterness.

And I have found that people listen. I believe that's because I speak from my heart. They see me as an innocent little girl who suffered so much, who is supposed to be angry, who is supposed to be dead.

Although I did not become a doctor, I did find another way to heal. In 1997, I established the Kim Foundation, a non-profit group that provides funds for medical assistance to children who are victims of war and terrorism. In 1997, I was appointed a Goodwill Ambassador for Peace for UNESCO.

I could have stayed frozen in time, forever The Girl in the Picture, forever the victim. But I no longer run away, and I am no longer a victim. It was the photograph that saved my life, but it was my reaching out to others that finally convinced me it was a life worth saving.

Marc's story: "What kind of legacy?"

"That which we witness, we are forever changed by, and once witnessed we can never go back."

—Angeles Arrien

When I was eighteen, I worked as a page in the Canadian House of Commons while starting my first year of college. Dressed like a penguin in a blazer and tie, I served water—with ice or without—delivered "top secret" messages, and fetched stationery for the country's most powerful leaders. It was a small job of smaller details, but just as in the U.S. Congress, it kept the country running. Except for one nervous moment when I accidentally dumped a glass of water on the prime minister, I was thrilled to be a part of history in the making. Fresh out of high school, I was accustomed to catching flak for passing notes; now it was my job. I imagined that my life in politics was off to a great start.

One day I delivered a note to a formidable and balding gentleman who stopped me with a query. "What kind of legacy do you want to leave, son?"

Baffled by a question I had never been asked before, I gave a snappy answer. "Sir," I replied, "I intend to study hard and deliver water with ever greater efficiency. One day, I will become a senior page and tell all the little pages where to get the water and the stationery."

He was unimpressed, but he did not let up. In his next breath, he told me about his work with an amazing charity that volunteered in the slums of Thailand. Was I interested? "No thank you, sir," I replied. I was happy where I was.

I figured that was the end of it, but this gentleman persisted. The next day *and* the next, he called me over to ask the same question. When school ended for the year, I was on a plane to Bangkok, Thailand. The man was very persuasive.

It was a huge risk. I was turning my back on a supposed dream job, which was writing speeches for a member of Parliament. I had to put my scholarship on hold. All my savings went to buying the plane ticket. I told my parents I was off to “change the world” and, in order to secure their permission, I had to promise I would finish school. When they asked me questions about the safety of where I was staying, I made up vague answers.

I had finally recognized that I was faced with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a real difference in people’s lives. I felt that if I didn’t seize it right away, it would become harder and harder to do so with each passing year. I knew that if I let myself grow accustomed to life in Ottawa and its comforts, I might never again find the courage to make such a journey. And so I got on the plane.

When I arrived in Bangkok, I was startled by the airport’s marble floors and beautiful architecture. Skyscrapers loomed large in plated gold. From the back of a taxi, I looked to my left and saw a BMW. A Mercedes was on my right. Why did I give up a great job to come to Thailand to help all these wealthy people? On the one hand, I was terrified—there I was, alone and far from home, unable to understand Thai and with no easy way to communicate with loved ones. On the other hand, I was angry because I felt I had been tricked into putting my life back in North America on hold just to help people who didn’t really need it!

Then the cab entered Klong Toey. Forgotten by many, this slum community sits on the edge of the Thai capital surrounding the city’s major port, a world away from Bangkok’s wealthy neighborhoods. Stretching for miles, it is a sprawling sea of corrugated tin, mud and cement bricks, zinc roofing, open sewers, and garbage heaps. It’s not on any tourist map. In fact, it isn’t on *any* map. It was a world away from suburbia. My heart sank as I came face-to-face with poverty for the very first time in my life. As we headed deeper into the slum, I was stricken with self-doubt. Would I be strong enough to cope in this kind of environment? Would I really be able to make any kind of difference? Outwardly I was trying my best to remain calm, but inwardly I was quickly beginning to doubt that I would be able to stomach my new surroundings. I was certain I’d made a mistake.

Tens of thousands of people live in Klong Toey on less than a dollar a day. In a country much loved by tourists for delicious food, beautiful beaches, and diverse culture, the people of this community are hungry, isolated, and struggling to meet their most basic needs.

I had been assigned to work at the community-development center, in a part of the slum known as the “slaughterhouse.” A major source of revenue for the community was slaughtering animals and preparing meat for sale.

As I drove into the slum, I considered the divide between those in Bangkok who had so much more than they required and those in Klong Toey who had little or less than nothing. I was greeted by the center’s friendly volunteer coordinator and directed to my simple apartment where I dropped my belongings. From this apartment, I would hear the slaughtering of pigs every night from midnight until dawn, their shrill screams tearing through the night air.

Next I was ushered to the AIDS ward of a hospice in the slum. I would later learn that the ward did not exist, at least not officially. Not a single person in Thailand had AIDS, according to the Thai government at the time. People got “sick,” of course, sometimes “very sick,” but no one had AIDS. The hospice was home to an ever-growing number of “very sick” people.

I entered the ward and was greeted by two Thai nurses.

“Thank goodness you are here, Marc,” said the first.

“You’re a doctor, right?”

I shook my head.

“So, you are a medical student then!”

I shook my head again.

“But you know medicine, right?”

“Kinda,” I offered. “I watch *E.R.* every Thursday.”

After a rapid exchange in Thai, the first one said, “No problem. Get ready for your four-hour medical school training!”

“But in my country medical school takes four years!” I protested.

“We don’t have that long,” she replied. “So we better get started.”

During the next few hours, I learned to clean wounds, administer IVs, treat bedsores, and dispense medicine. The work was punishing, made worse by stifling heat, frequent blackouts, and an incredible stench in the air. I tried desperately to hide my weak nerves and queasy stomach, but more than once dashed for the bathroom to throw up.

Just when it seemed my training was coming to an end, the nurse took

me aside. “There are only two more things you need to know,” she said. “On the left-hand side of the ward, you will find what we call the Exit Area.”

As it turned out, she meant exit in the largest sense of the word. Terminally ill patients were hidden behind a curtain and then exited out of the ward after death. “The second thing you need to know,” she continued, “is that we haven’t had a day off in three weeks. You’ll be looking after the ward by yourself for the next shift.”

My jaw dropped.

“Don’t worry, Marc,” said the other nurse, patting me on the shoulder before turning to leave. “Think of this as the beginning of your residency!”

And with that, they walked out. Alone and petrified, I tried unsuccessfully to keep calm.

I counted to twenty-four. That’s how many AIDS patients were in my charge. What am I going to do? I thought. What *can* I do? I fell back on my training with the Canadian government and put my talents to work. I served patients water—some with ice, some without. Next, I tried to cheer up everyone, myself included, giving enthusiastic high-fives to patient after patient. Soon enough, everyone was laughing. Some were laughing with me, others most definitely *at* me, but I didn’t care. As long as I could keep people smiling, I was sure it would all be fine. And it was. Until a short while later, when a patient in the Exit Area began to choke. He had fluid in his lungs and could not breathe.

As I crossed the floor, I could hear the man gasping for air. Fumbling and scared, I pulled back the curtain and administered the medicine the nurses had recommended. The man didn’t respond. He was still fighting for breath. I ran into the street yelling for help, my vision blurred with tears. Passersby looked on sympathetically, but no one would follow me back inside. I later learned people were afraid that by entering the ward they would catch AIDS. I ran to the choking man, whose name I didn’t know and would never learn. With nothing left to offer, I sat down and held his hand, looking into his eyes as he breathed heavily for a while and then stopped. Watching him slip away, I was hit by a feeling of anguish such as I’d never felt, either before or since. It haunts me to this day.

I was crying when the nurses returned. I fought to stop, but could not. I was crushed and emotionally exhausted. “Marc, people in the ward die all the time. That’s why they’re there,” they told me. “Now let’s get back to work.”

I stared in disbelief. Get back to work? As if I had no feelings? I had not signed up for this.

Fighting back the intense sorrow, I thanked the nurses for what they had taught me and told them I was going home. After one short day, I was calling it quits.

I called my parents, who arranged for my flight back to North America. It was an incredibly difficult phone call because it meant I had failed. Up until that point, I had been a cocky teenager who thought he could accomplish anything. At that moment, I knew I couldn’t. I had to admit I was in over my head. I imagined people back home would ask why I was back so quickly. I was already embarrassed.

Still, I couldn’t wait to leave. I ran to my tiny apartment and started to repack my bag.

I was interrupted by a knock at the door. I looked out, then down. Staring up at me was a young boy, about my brother Craig’s age, in a yellow T-shirt and blue shorts. “What are you doing?” he asked.

Quietly, I told him I was preparing to leave. “You can’t!” he insisted. “You need to stay for our birthday party.”

This boy spoke exceptional English. As part of my quick and dirty education, I had learned that if children from the Klong Toey slums speak English, it’s not thanks to a private school education, or any education at all. More often than not, it’s because they’ve worked as prostitutes for English-speaking foreigners. The boy spoke English with a European accent. I stopped, looked into his eyes, and listened.

The boy explained that as street kids, he and his friends did not know their parents, let alone their ages or birthdates. But that didn’t stop them from celebrating. Each and every year, everyone would get together and pool their hard-earned pennies to hold one massive birthday party. The festivities were days away.

I was blown away.

The boy made me promise I would attend. Without thinking, I gave him my word. Of course I would be there. Or would I? I was torn. I wanted to flee, but against my better judgment I decided to stay a little longer. I postponed my return flight.

During the next few days, I met the boy’s friends. They taught me very basic Thai. I watched the barefoot boys try to earn a small living by shining shoes. I learned that police would beat them up for fun. I marveled at the way they looked after each other. It was an education unlike I had ever found in a textbook.

A few days later, I set out for the party unsure of what to expect. I heard the laughter before I saw the feast. When the children saw me,

they shouted with delight, happy to have one more friend with whom to share their banquet of peanuts and watermelons.

It was one of the most meaningful moments of my life. I was humbled to be part of such a remarkable gathering. A bunch of kids, too poor to buy shoes, gave me the gift of perspective. After the food, there was singing, dancing, storytelling, and much more laughter. Unlike the birthday parties of my youth, there was no mountain of presents, yet the room was filled with joy. I was surrounded by children who were celebrating life in the middle of hardship. It was then that I began to understand the true meaning of happiness.

Though they'd never know it, it was these young boys who convinced me to stay. After the party, I extended my trip indefinitely. I lived in Klong Toey for close to a year, teaching English to schoolchildren and logging many more heart-wrenching days in the AIDS ward. I watched many people die. Yet every morning around seven o'clock, I met my young friends to play soccer.

Thailand changed my life. I arrived there with teenage baggage and left with the confidence to be myself.

As I departed from Klong Toey, I considered the question that had started my journey: What kind of legacy did I want to leave? I was now much closer to the answer.

When I returned to North America, it wasn't to the seat of Canadian government. By then, my priorities had changed. I wanted to learn from the experts about the world around me and further shape my legacy in honor of my soccer-playing friends. After a long search, I accepted a full scholarship to Harvard University to study international relations.

What a decision! The environment was fast paced, to say the least, and the workload was punishing, but I enjoyed it. I was there to learn, so I didn't argue when the library was more familiar to me than my own apartment. As time passed, I answered a lot of the questions that burned in my head. But sure enough, the minute I did, more questions took their place.

Fast forward four years and I faced my life's second big question: What would be my next step?

Here was my dilemma. For Harvard University students, the world's largest banks routinely hosted information nights at high-end hotels. Butlers served shrimp kebabs and oysters in the half shell while bankers led presentations to highlight company earnings and to forecast our own well-paid futures. These bankers, usually men, spoke of "private equity," "wealth management," "leveraged buyouts," and "mergers and acquisitions."

Upon graduation, I was presented with a series of lucrative job offers. The funniest one came from a manufacturing icon who asked me to manage a factory in Estonia. "It's cold, but the money is good!"

Mostly, though, the offers came from banks. Almost all involved going to Wall Street to become an investment banker—otherwise known as an "I-Banker" as per Harvard-speak on campus. Starting salary was approximately my parent's take-home income—combined. I would help firms become successful, restructure management, and perhaps come up with plans on how to best lay off people so the company could become more "productive" and "cost effective." The starting salary, signing bonus, expense account, expensive suits, and fancy dinners were supposed to make me feel better about all of this.

Fortunately, I didn't have to weigh the offers too seriously because I was going to pursue a law degree at Oxford University. But there, the pressure intensified to lure me into the corporate world. As a Rhodes Scholar, I quickly found out there was an unwritten rule that I could have virtually any consulting job I wanted. Some large companies boasted publicly they had "the most Rhodes Scholars on staff." The starting salary from one job was around \$160,000 with signing bonus and cost-of-living and relocation expenses. This wasn't bad for someone who had worked only as a gopher in the Canadian House of Commons making \$12 an hour delivering water. No experience necessary. They would send us to "training camp," where we could learn how to speak, think, act, and make money appropriately.

I was pretty certain this was not what I wanted, although the salary was very enticing, especially for a budget-conscious student who had been living on canned spaghetti sauce for more than a few years. Judged by the standards of my middle-class upbringing, the salaries they were offering were unimaginable. But the jobs themselves were dull. Pushing paper around a desk? Nope. Not for me. When I explained to my classmates that I might just go back to North America and run a children's charity, other students actually mocked me. One classmate said he would take pity on me and allow me to use one of the many houses he expected to own one day, if I was ever back in London.

Deciding not to take the big job and the big salary was actually a difficult choice. I worried I was throwing away my education. After all, I probably could have returned home to run WE without degrees from Harvard and Oxford. And it's also very difficult to say no when you realize that those who say yes will immediately jump to the front of the line

in this world. How would I pay off my student loans, which would kick in as soon as I graduated? How would I ever begin to save for a car or a down payment on a house or condo? The financial uncertainty made me anxious, but my passion to help others won.

What did I choose?

I chose a life where I get up every day excited by new challenges. I do often work sixteen-hour days—but it is not for me that I work. Through Leaders Today, an organization I co-founded in 1999, I played a part in empowering thousands of youth across North America every year with leadership training. Leaders Today became ME to WE social enterprise in 2009, continuing to provide leadership training, but expanding to provide products and experiences that help people make daily choices that change the world. With WE, I work building schools in developing countries, speaking to children, meeting fascinating people, and helping others who are far less fortunate. I'm surrounded by young people whose lives are filled with happiness and passion.

I'm humbled to be able to do this work on a daily basis. Unlike my friends on Wall Street, I don't have a \$5,000 watch. My \$100 model works great. I don't dine in five-star restaurants every night. And I still do make spaghetti using canned spaghetti sauce. But I can look in the mirror at the end of the day and see myself smiling back. I am simply happier helping other people.

Like Craig, I experienced my own ME to WE transformation.

I got my first glimpse of the tremendous power this philosophy holds at my young Thai friends' birthday party. It was an abrupt awakening for my teenage self, yet to this day I still feel that I learned more about compassion, caring, and leadership from my street kid friends than I have from any of my tweed-clad professors with endless letters after their names. Sometimes life's most important lessons need to be literally staring us in the face before we're able to recognize their true value.



ME to WE, a social enterprise, creates socially conscious products and experiences that allow people to do good through their everyday choices. Half of all ME to WE profits are donated to support WE Charity, while the other half is reinvested to grow the mission of the social enterprise. This is the future of doing good. Where everyday choices make the world a better place.

- ▶ Since 2009, ME to WE has donated more than \$10 million to WE Charity in cash and in-kind donations.
- ▶ Through Track Your Impact, every socially conscious ME to WE purchase gives a life-changing impact to a child or family in a WE Charity partner community—from families provided with access to clean water to children provided with the resources to succeed in school. When a code from a product is tracked online, you can see where your social impact is delivered. Completely transparent, this system allows people to connect the dots, from the item they bought directly to the WE Village it helped empower.
- ▶ More than 1,400 mamas in Kenya are employed through ME to WE Artisans, a line of original accessories handcrafted by artisans in WE Charity partner communities.
- ▶ After returning home from a ME to WE youth volunteer trip, 93% of youth report that they intend to play a leadership role in social justice activities in their community.



Start Now!

As Marc learned through volunteering, you don't need to have a degree in medicine to have talents worth sharing. Everyone has something unique to contribute. Make a list of your own talents. Ask yourself:

- ▶ When I have free time, what do I like to do?
- ▶ What would my friends say are my best qualities?
- ▶ What do people ask me for help with?
- ▶ What skills do I have that I would like to share?



Living ME to WE

1. **Make a mentor's day.** List the mentors you've had over your lifetime. Did a teacher believe in you? Did a colleague give you good advice at a critical moment? Take the next step and thank each person on your list for the difference they've made in your life. Pick up the phone, write a handwritten thank-you note, or pay a surprise visit.
2. **Propose dress-down days.** Ask your boss or principal if he or she could offer a dress-down day in your workplace or school. Collect \$2 from everyone who wears casual clothes that day. Suggest khakis instead of suits, and jeans instead of school uniforms. Each month, support a new cause with the money you raise.
3. **Wear your words.** Many of us wear T-shirts that advertise brand names. Why not try something different and wear one that conveys a positive social message? Perhaps "Stop HIV/AIDS" or "We are all one human race." Wear it, live it, and speak out with style.

My story

Keith Taylor

For as long as I can remember, I had three dreams. One of them was to become a teacher. One was to live in New York City. And one was to become a philanthropist.

After fourteen years of school and about \$100,000 in student loans, I had managed to fulfill one of those dreams. I had become a professor. At thirty-two, Ph.D. in hand, I secured the academic Holy Grail—a tenure-track job, teaching in my field, at a terrific university just outside of Nashville, Tennessee. Along the way, I had gotten married and divorced. I'd become the father of a remarkable little boy. I'd made a lot of good friends.

Still, no matter what I did, no matter how hard I worked, I couldn't make ends meet. My starting salary was barely enough to pay rent, child support, basic utilities, and my student loans. With each little increase in salary came an increase in expenses.

I still wanted very badly to be a philanthropist, but that dream seemed unattainable. To my mind, a philanthropist was someone with hundreds of millions of dollars to funnel into medical research or to build hospitals. I, on the other hand, could barely take care of myself. Just when I was ahead on my bills, something would happen—my car would break down, for example—and I'd find myself behind again.

I still wanted to help people, but I couldn't understand how. That \$5 I might give to charity meant \$5 worth of gas I couldn't purchase.

So this is how I lived, month after month, for two years. And every month, my dream of becoming a philanthropist seemed farther and farther out of reach, until one evening in March 2002.

It occurred to me that throughout my life, there had been many times that people had pulled me through a tough time. They hadn't showered me with thousands of dollars, but rather with tens or twenties to help me with small, unexpected expenses. My father had stepped in to repair my car when he knew I couldn't afford it. My boss had helped me to buy a pair of glasses to replace the ones I had broken while working with him. My best friend in college once paid my power bill when I had been forced to choose between books for class and the light to read by.

