



Susila
Dharma
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THE POWER OF VOLUNTEERING

GIVING OUR BEST, SHARING OUR GIFTS WITH THE WORLD

Photo Courtesy of Ruthie Brown



Dear Reader,

More important than giving money is the sharing of our time and talents with those who need them. That is the essence of putting our latihan into practice. In this year-end eNews, we bring you some personal stories about how volunteering has changed lives. Three of these are from youth who left their comfort zones and challenged themselves to support SD projects in South Africa and Ecuador. Many thanks to Ruthie, Miro and Emil for sharing your volunteering journeys with us real-time - these experiences were not easy but definitely life changing both for you and the people whose lives you touched. We also bring you the story of Ramsey Oren and Leslie Stettler who started First Light Social Club for elderly people with dementia - opening their home and giving their time to spread joy and build a more caring community. Finally, we share the stories of Vincent Mount, now SDIA Chair whose life was forever changed by volunteering as part of the organising team for the 1993 World Congress in Amanecer; and the story of how Osanna Favre went from suffering flea bites and sweltering heat as a volunteer in Colombia, to starting Human Force Volunteering for Social Change - giving hundreds of youth the opportunity to learn about the world around them and their place in it, while giving their time and effort to local SD projects around world.

Don't get me wrong, we also need and very much appreciate your donations. But Susila Dharma is about more than that. It is about giving of yourself. Let 2025 be the year we all reach out a little more to the community around us, and do



our part to make the world a better place.

Virginia Thomas

SDIA Executive Director

My Experience With I Protect Me in South Africa

By Ruthie Brown

In the fall of 2024, I had the privilege to travel from the United States to Port Elizabeth, South Africa, to volunteer for I Protect Me (IPM). IPM is an organization focused on preventing domestic violence, sexual assault, femicide, and teen pregnancy in South Africa. Their employees teach important social skills such as setting boundaries, the importance of standing up to bullies, and family planning through in-school and after-school programs. IPM also provides victim support by building and sharing a network of psychologists, therapists, and other NGOs that can provide resources and help to victims of violence.

As a second-degree black belt and someone specializing in gender and sexuality studies, I am deeply committed to empowering vulnerable communities via martial arts. IPM was looking to incorporate self-defense into its curriculum, and I wanted to learn from an organization doing important prevention work in communities heavily impacted by gender-based violence. So, I traveled over 9,000 miles to Port Elizabeth in South Africa to do just that. I discovered that IPM not only served children in the local community but also inspired resilience and provided meaningful work for its employees. I saw firsthand the profound impact a small organization can have on the larger community. My experience was full of grief and wonder, laughter and fear, profound introspection, and by the time I left, I knew that working toward gender equality would be a lifelong vocation.

One of the IPM employees, like many in South Africa, has been resilient in the face of adversity. Her story reflects IPM's impact on the lives of those they come in contact with. Tyrone (28) lost her mother during her senior year of high school. She only saw her father, who lived in a different city, "once in a blue moon." When her mother died, she became the guardian of her three younger brothers. Although she was accepted to attend university, she had to drop out to care for her brothers, two of whom were very sick.

In the next three years, two of her brothers would succumb to their illnesses and pass away. Grief-stricken, she thought her fortunes had changed when she met a young man

whom she quickly fell in love with. They married and had a daughter together. But the young man she had fallen in love with became abusive and cruel, and she did not want to leave him. She explained that “you lose yourself when you are being abused”... “you are so in love that you start believing what they tell you, all the negative things. You are living for this person that is keeping you in a cage.” Tyronese eventually left her husband after he almost killed her, and because she attended a victim empowerment training at IPM. She left her husband to protect her daughter and her youngest brother, to ensure that they would have a mother. “Children go through trauma, we need to do our best to stop the cycle of abuse.”

Now, Tyronese is the “In-school Coordinator” at IPM. A leader in the organization, she manages nearly 50 provincial workers. Supported by her IPM coworkers, she recently opened her own event company. Now she can pursue her passions: dance and working with children. She was among the first people to welcome me with a big smile and open arms to South Africa, and she is one of the strongest women I’ve ever met.

Tyronese shared her story with me on my second day in South Africa. In the following week, five gunmen broke into an elementary school while class was in session and robbed the teachers of their cell phones and computers, traumatizing the children. The next day, two men were shot and killed just down the road from where I lived. That night, I felt overwhelmed by the sheer amount and regularity of violence in Port Elizabeth. I cried for victims of domestic violence; I cried for the children who didn’t want to go to school because they were afraid the gunmen would return; and I cried because I was scared. In the next few weeks, I struggled to adjust to my new reality. In order to ensure my safety, I could not leave the house or the IPM office without someone accompanying me, meaning my freedom and independence were limited.

However, as a volunteer at IPM, for every minute of fear, there was a minute of wonder. I remember very clearly the first elementary school I went to. We stopped in all of the grade 5 classrooms where students wanted to ask important questions like “Have you been to Target?” and “What’s your favorite Starbucks drink?” I was especially happy when a little girl told me “You look like Sabrina Carpenter.” When a little boy asked if he could give me a hug, I obviously said yes. In a matter of seconds, the entire class had lined up for their hug, for their turn. A coworker at IPM told me that might be the only hug some of those children would receive that week.

Over the next two months, I taught self-defense to children of all different ages and backgrounds. Many of them left wanting to learn more and with smiles on their faces. But some of the most meaningful time I spent teaching self-defense was when I was working with other IPM employees. Many of them, like Tyronese, had experienced violence at the hands of a partner or family member. I was relieved to hear that many of my coworkers left my classes feeling stronger, more empowered, and safer. My most important job was to ensure that the self-defense curriculum remained a key part of the IPM program long after I left. So I taught a group of coworkers who were especially interested in and dedicated to learning from me how to teach self-defense. By the end of my time in South Africa, a number of them were excellent leaders. I also filmed self-defense instruction videos to ensure that if they had any questions there was material they could refer to.

Through my time at IPM, I witnessed both the devastating impact of violence and the transformative power of prevention work. The organization not only provides crucial education but also creates meaningful employment opportunities for those who want to help break the cycles of poverty and abuse and support services to prevent and address violence against women and children. While the challenges facing communities in Port Elizabeth are significant, (the unemployment rate is 50%) IPM's holistic approach - combining practical skills training, violence prevention education and victim support networks, furthers positive change. My experience reinforced for me the importance of supporting grassroots organizations that understand and respond to their communities' specific needs. I want to do more of this work when I graduate. I'm grateful for Susila Dharma’s sponsorship.



Volunteering isn't always easy, but full of learnings:

Emil Stevenson Sapir and Ramiro Mount share their experiences volunteering at FUEGOS and the Iche food school and restaurant in Manabi, Ecuador



From September to the end of November 2024, Emil Stevenson Sapir and Ramiro Mount traveled to Ecuador to volunteer for Susila Dharma project “FUEGOS” and the [Iche food school](#). As volunteers, they played a number of different roles, including teaching English to the students at the food school, working at Iche’s high-end restaurant, and making videos to document various food transformation processes developed at the school.

What were some of the challenges you faced? How could your volunteering experience be improved?

Emil and Miro identified many challenges during their first months as volunteers. The main one was language barriers and cultural differences. According to Emil “Definitely the biggest challenge was arriving at Iche and not being able to speak or understand the language. We were staying in the same accommodation as the Food School students, but we weren’t able to communicate with them”. They recommended that potential improvements for future volunteering experiences would be to ensure one or two months of intensive language training, and the need for the host project to identify volunteer liaison with the time to work with the volunteers and integrate them into the programme. According to Miro: “Cecilia and the whole team were amazing, but a challenge was that the Iche staff were generally very busy, and did not seem to be aware that we were coming and what we were there to do until shortly before we arrived. They all had other jobs, so sometimes we felt like a burden, even though we were there to help”.

What were some of the highlights of your time at Iche?

A definite highlight according to Miro and Emil was the experience of teaching English to students, focusing on kitchen-related vocabulary and action verbs, developing fun and interactive games to help the learning process: *“This was something that we had not done before and we learned a lot about what works and what doesn't in terms of teaching English. It is a great feeling when you see people enjoying themselves and learning at the same time. It was challenging to engage the students initially and the program's schedule was quite full, with students rotating around different areas.”*

Another highlight was helping with all the different tasks at a high-end restaurant: *“This is a really fast-paced environment with a lot of attention to detail in the kitchen”*. Miro and Emil worked on all aspects including waiting tables, behind the bar, food prep, and in the organic garden, documenting the production of special local ingredients like ground peanut sauce and a unique sugarcane liquor. They helped translate the menu into English and

produced a video documenting each step of the process of making peanut sauce. They also helped in the restaurant’s organic garden: *“The restaurant plans to expand the organic garden and also to build more facilities to offer hospitality or catering degrees including to international students.”* According to Miro *“The only thing we were not able to do was work in the kitchen during service – the environment is simply too fast paced, and requires a level of Spanish that we did not have. So we had to get out of the way and let the others do the work”.*

They both enjoyed learning about the history and culture of the country, particularly through trying different foods and learning about local ingredients. A standout experience was enjoying the tasting menu at Iche restaurant - described as *"the best meal I ever had"*. What a fantastic way to end a period of volunteering at one of the leading food schools in Ecuador.

Overcoming Language and Cultural Barriers, and a dog bite!

“As foreigners we became aware that we are people of privilege, which we understand”, Miro noted. Emil and Miro sometimes encountered resentment from some of the students, who were not receptive to their attempts at friendship. Emil commented that *“Some students were more empathetic and open to learning English. I also recounted a personal challenge, being bitten by a dog and having to spend a month recovering, which made me feel isolated and depressed, having to stay inside for much of the day”.* Miro shared that one of his positive experiences during his trip was discovering the Ping Pong Club in San Vicente, where he made friends and participated in a national tournament.

Joys of Learning to Teach

Of all the experiences that seemed most meaningful to Emil and Miro was their experience of learning to teach English to the food-school students, most of them having no English but needing to learn it to advance in their future enterprises. *“It was challenging engaging the students in the first lesson, but we found success in the second lesson by making it more interactive and fun. We realized the importance of planning and preparing for each moment in the class, which goes by so fast. So much of teaching is boring because learners are not engaged in entertaining ways. A definite highlight was learning to connect with the students who were eager to engage in competitive type games and had a lot of fun while learning English.”*

Follow Miro and Emil as they apply their teaching skills and continue their journey to volunteer for more SD projects in Colombia in our next eNews!



Photos: Courtesy of Emil Stevenson and Ramiro Mount



Donate Now to FUEGOS

How a Power-outage led to the “First Light Social Club”:

Ramsey Oren and Leslie Stettler share their joy with elderly people living with dementia



Finding the power from within

“The idea came to us one morning during a power outage. What do you do when the power goes out and you have nothing else to distract you? We had a deep conversation about our lives and what we wanted to do next,” Ramsey recalls. Leslie, his wife and a Montessori teacher and principal, had read about Cameron Camp, who was using Montessori environments and principles in long-term care settings, particularly for people with dementia. Leslie had bought Camp's book, but hadn't acted on it for 10 years. The power outage conversation was a turning point, and she and Ramsey, both retired and long-time Subud members, decided that even though they did not have a lot of money, what they did have was time and the ability to create joyful experiences for those who needed them in their community.

Caring for Dementia Patients and Giving Back

Ramsey and Leslie ran a Bed and Breakfast for eight years. One guest's story struck a chord with Ramsey – she was attending the funeral of her brother who was affected by dementia. *“He had committed suicide because he didn't want to be a burden on his family. This led me to consider the challenges faced by both dementia patients and their caregivers and the need to provide relief. My perspective on life was changing, as a retired person, shifting from focusing on earning a living to giving back to my community. I was inspired by the Mennonite community's successful volunteer work, raising millions of dollars for causes all around the world, dedicating themselves to giving back. I felt that my time could be better used doing the same”.*

But where to start?

Leslie and Ramsey started by informing themselves. They took an online course from the University of Tasmania in Australia to gain knowledge about working with dementia patients and decided that they wanted to do this in their home – to create a non-institutionalized environment, focusing on creating a sense of warmth, safety, joy and fellowship for participants. They wanted to start small, to create a sense of intimacy within the group. The First Light Social Club was born out of two, then four, then six, then eight members – with a maximum set at 12 participants meeting weekly in Leslie and Ramsey's home. First Light was set up as a not-for-profit society, with five Directors (two of whom were in Subud) and a number of volunteers. The club's concept evolved over time, with the initial goal of incorporating Montessori materials, but there was a lot of learning regarding what worked well and what did not work to engage those living with early and mid-stage dementia.

What they liked and didn't like: engaging with those suffering from early and mid-stage dementia.

“We found that the Montessori materials were not effective. People found them to be childish and not adapted for them. We found that activities such as Tai Chi, movement, drumming circles, and conversations about personal experiences were more engaging than initially thought. Some activities, like using virtual reality goggles, did not work as participants were uncomfortable with the technology”. Ramsey and Leslie were learning on the go and could see that direct interaction between participants and caregivers was the best, helping to address the deeper loneliness that people feel when they don't get a chance to share and interact as human beings. The weekly social club meetings, which includes lunch and dessert, provides a much-needed social time for participants and a break for their caregivers who are often working from home: *“Leslie prepares a lunch for each meeting, and her food, especially dessert, is a big hit” says Ramsey.*

Ramsey sees this work as having therapeutic benefits but also generating pure joy for the seniors, particularly those who are homebound or incapacitated. They used technology, such as a big screen TV, to bring nature and other awe-inspiring experiences. They also played music and showed videos of extraordinary acts, new discoveries, and positive stories. According to Ramsey *“Music, particularly from their youth, had a profound effect on them, often bringing back memories and emotions. One woman in our group had lost the ability to speak, but when we played a song that she loved, amazingly she was able to recite every word.”*

Using our inner experience for social good

Ramsey reflected on the potential for increased community engagement and volunteer opportunities for Subud members within their respective groups. *“This experience has brought me more than it has taken. In the past, yes, I did volunteer work – I was a helper, I was a group chair and played other roles within the organisation. But this is different. There is a huge value in looking beyond our Subud community and contributing to the greater good.”* Ramsey says that this type of volunteering can help combat the deep loneliness, the unseen pandemic among the elderly, providing meaningful social connections. He shared his experience of being guided by the Latihan, which allowed him to try new things and overcome his fears. *“Working from my inner gave me more trust and confidence that I would find the way to overcome the challenges that were coming my way”.*

Many thanks to Ramsey Oren of the Subud Fraser Valley group for sharing the story of [First Light Social Club](#) with us and for putting himself out there for the whole community.



Photos: Courtesy of Ramsey Oren

Donate to First Light Social Club Through SDIA

Looking Back, Amanecer, Colombia, 1992

By Vincent Mount, SDIA Chair



Photo: Vincent as volunteer with friends

Volunteering in Amanecer started me on a lifelong journey.

In 1992, I took a year out of my university degree in landscape architecture to go live and volunteer in Amanecer, Colombia. The Subud Colombians were busy building a community centre, with a beautiful hall designed by Muchtar Martins, along with a hostel, restaurant and various houses, surrounded by green open space with views across to the Andes. Conditions were rather basic there, things were chaotic and much work was being done in a grand effort to prepare the place for the coming world congress in 1993.

It was an amazing year of personal discovery for me, at a time when I was questioning whether I wanted to continue with my landscape degree. After seeing where there was a need, I occupied myself with building brick paths, heading a small team of volunteers to pave the way between the buildings so people weren't walking on the bare earth. I already had some Spanish from taking lessons back home with a fellow student from Madrid but it took me a couple of months to get more comfortable with the language there, understanding more of the local terms, the slang and more subtle nuances of communication. There were volunteers from many countries and we were a melting pot of nationalities all grappling with the cultural differences. It proved to be a big learning curve for most of us, on many levels - physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual.

I'm so glad I had the opportunity to be there during that year. Many unexpected things happened, the most significant for me was meeting my future wife, Mariamah, but also making several lifelong friendships that have nurtured me deeply. We played music and games and volleyball, we put on plays together, we fasted, we went on trips, we got to know Colombia a little. But moreso, I learned from the challenging experiences there about human beings, what weaves us together, how we work together, what causes us pain, what gives us joy. It wasn't a smooth ride, but it was a very rich one.



I think the volunteering gave me insights that I have used throughout my life. In my work I am most interested in engaging with groups of people, doing projects that are for the common good, and bringing people in touch with nature. It has been a natural move to become part of the Susila Dharma network, to help others build stronger communities and put their Latihan into action where they are, to celebrate being human together.

Photos: Courtesy of Vincent Mount.

Vincent as volunteer, aged 22

Donate to Fundación Amanecer

Looking Forward - Pint-Sized Challenge, Giant Lessons: Embracing a Volunteer’s Journey

Human Force Camp

By Osanna Favre, SDIA Board Member

I lay awake all night plotting my revenge. I’d become a walking flea-infested buffet. After wrestling all day with Guadua* bamboo to secure a roof, I found myself questioning my life choices. One moment, I felt like a superhero on a mission; the next, I was a desperado with grand plans to exterminate a bunch of pint-sized vermin. My volunteer experience up until then had been great, building a classroom in Colombia for local disadvantaged children. But at that moment my world was upside down.

This unexpected battle illustrated a larger truth in life: just as I struggled that night, many young people today struggle with feelings of despair when confronted with the daunting global challenges we face today. Climate change. War. Inequality and social injustice. Access to quality education, clean water, healthcare just to name a few. They wonder, “The problems are too big—what can I possibly do?” However, the journey of making an impact is rarely straightforward. In fact, the very challenges we face can lead us to unexpected answers and teach us invaluable lessons not just about ourselves but the role we can play to make a difference.

Reflecting on my journey as the Human Force Program Coordinator, I never imagined I’d still be here after building a youth learning service program from the ground up and connecting with people globally for over a decade, starting with my first volunteer experience. Initially, I wanted to be the world’s superhero for a day; now, I see myself as a vital piece of a larger puzzle striving to make the world a better place.

I encountered tough challenges and experienced significant personal growth along the way. Believing in myself during moments of doubt has made this journey worthwhile. It took courage to try new things, make mistakes, and embrace the learning process, often requiring me to simply "wing it" to keep moving forward. Those challenging moments ultimately helped me develop a deeper connection with myself and the inner strength I needed to find my way here.

It’s crucial to understand that success isn’t always about having a grand plan either. From experience, it’s about taking small, meaningful steps and working together. Every effort counts and true change is born from collective action. Embracing the unknown and navigating both the highs and lows can foster growth and resilience, allowing us to contribute to something greater than ourselves.

So, my word of advice to my younger self—and perhaps to any young listener out there—is to truly listen to yourself. Reflect on your passions and what brings you joy, because these pursuits can lead you to the most incredible places. Looking back, every moment that I honored my interests, doors opened to unexpected opportunities and enriched my life in ways I could never have imagined. Don't hesitate to step off the beaten path or explore new interests - whether it's art, science, adventure, or something else entirely, following your passions can lead you to discoveries you have yet to envision for yourself.

So, what's next on this wild journey? I'm excited to share that we're putting together a training camp aimed at empowering young people to create their own learning programs. Targeted at those who have already been on this journey with us, we're rolling up our sleeves to nurture the next generation of leaders while keeping our environmental footprint in check.

And finally, what ultimately happened to those pesky bugs, you ask? Did I manage to avert certain doom and reclaim my space as the superhero of my own story at least? Well, I invite you to come reveal that for yourself! If you haven't yet been part of our journey but are ready to follow your passion, we'll also be hosting our legendary Human Force camp next July/August (location TBC), and you're all invited! Bring your enthusiasm, your energy, and bug repellent—let's embark on this adventure together and spark meaningful change that blows to places unexpected!

Follow us on Instagram [@hellohumanforce](#) for details :)

Guadua* A type of bamboo used for traditional Colombian architecture.



Donate Now to Human Force

We want to thank you for your ongoing support to SDIA and our members projects. Without your support we could not have achieved the goals and objectives we set for ourselves each year.

Donate Now to Susila Dharma



We hope you enjoyed reading this issue of the SDIA eNews!

*If you did, please feel free to share it and **subscribe to our eNews** so you will receive it in your inbox when we have a new edition.*

Thanks for reading!



The Susila Dharma International Association (SDIA) is an association of 57 members operating in 26 countries around the world. SDIA connects these local teams with resources for training, expertise, project management and financing.

Our member projects run activities in the following Program Areas: Health and Wellbeing, Child Development, Education and Youth, Environment and Sustainable Livelihoods.

Our national chapters – Susila Dharma Nationals – support our projects and, in some cases, also run their own project activities.

See our website for more details www.susiladharma.org



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