

Re-entry and Return on Investment

By Jimi & Cristi Cook

We have devoted a number of our articles to attempts to convince you to participate in humanitarian aid missions, service projects, or other forms of volunteerism to serve others...and to do that responsibly so that you avoid charity traps¹ and toxic charity². So, if you have invested yourself in this type of work, you may have then dealt with, or are dealing with, questions, feelings, and emotions about “re-entry and return on investment.” Often, these events are once-in-a-lifetime, life-changing experiences that capture your heart and emotions and completely up-end your perspectives, philosophies, and priorities – and then you come home... Many volunteers are then up-ended again on “re-entry” by questions like:

How do I incorporate my new perspectives, philosophies, and priorities into ‘real life’?

Why doesn’t everyone want to hear my story?

Did I really make a difference?

Well, of course, there is no single, easy answer to these questions for everyone, but some considerations that may help include:

- Understand that “re-entry” can be difficult and talk to others on the team, in the organization, or who have done similar projects about how to prepare for it, process it, and handle it well.
- Realistically re-evaluate your ‘real life’ – Can you incorporate more local service into your routine? Do you have or can you create venues to raise awareness for the causes you are passionate about? Can you join or start a local chapter or branch of an organization you want to support?
- Create a 15-20 minute presentation about your project. Nobody, not even your mother, wants to sit through a 3-hour slide show detailing every part of what you did. Put together a succinct, focused presentation that tells the story in a 21st Century time frame – it will be more powerful, interesting, and effective, and you will get to present it more often and to more people.
- Follow up! It is not only OK, it is necessary that you determine your “return on investment” from the time, effort, and funds you gave to the project. This should be done through both organizational and personal mechanisms and connections. Find out where your contributions really went, what impact they had, and how that impact will be sustainable.¹ Do this by staying in touch with individuals from the community you served, reviewing the organization’s financial reports, newsletters and annual reports, and checking with groups who subsequently visit the site.

It is important to consider your “life after the mission” when planning to devote your time, money and emotions to such an engulfing effort. By preparing, processing, and effectively engaging others, as well as following up to evaluate your return on investment, you can ensure that your service will make a difference long term – for you and those you served.

¹ our June 2013 FAVS article

² our September 2012 FAVS article