

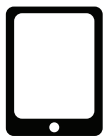
Expert Q&A: Viability

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Velvet Gaston began working with her local Engineers Without Borders (EWB) chapter in Raleigh, North Carolina, three years ago.

She has developed extensive voluntourism experience as well as technical expertise. She lived in Sierra Leone in the summer of 2013 while voluntouring for the LemonAid Fund and is a senior environmental engineering major at North Carolina State University.



Download the magazine to your iPad to [listen to audio](#) of the interviews.

ENGINEERS WITHOUT BORDERS

What is your role in Engineers Without Borders?

I'm the president of the chapter. I oversee the running of our international projects as well as all of our local outreach fundraising and public relations.

What are the most important areas that voluntourists can help with?

In a lot of situations, help is being provided that hasn't been asked for. I think voluntourists can be most effective in developing real relationships with communities and being able to provide direct resources in a very equilateral transfer, instead of it being programmatic development. The other area is capital development. Giving people the power to actually initiate and change something is usually more effective than providing something that they could accomplish for themselves if they simply had the ability to interact with their government.

How does EWB implement projects?

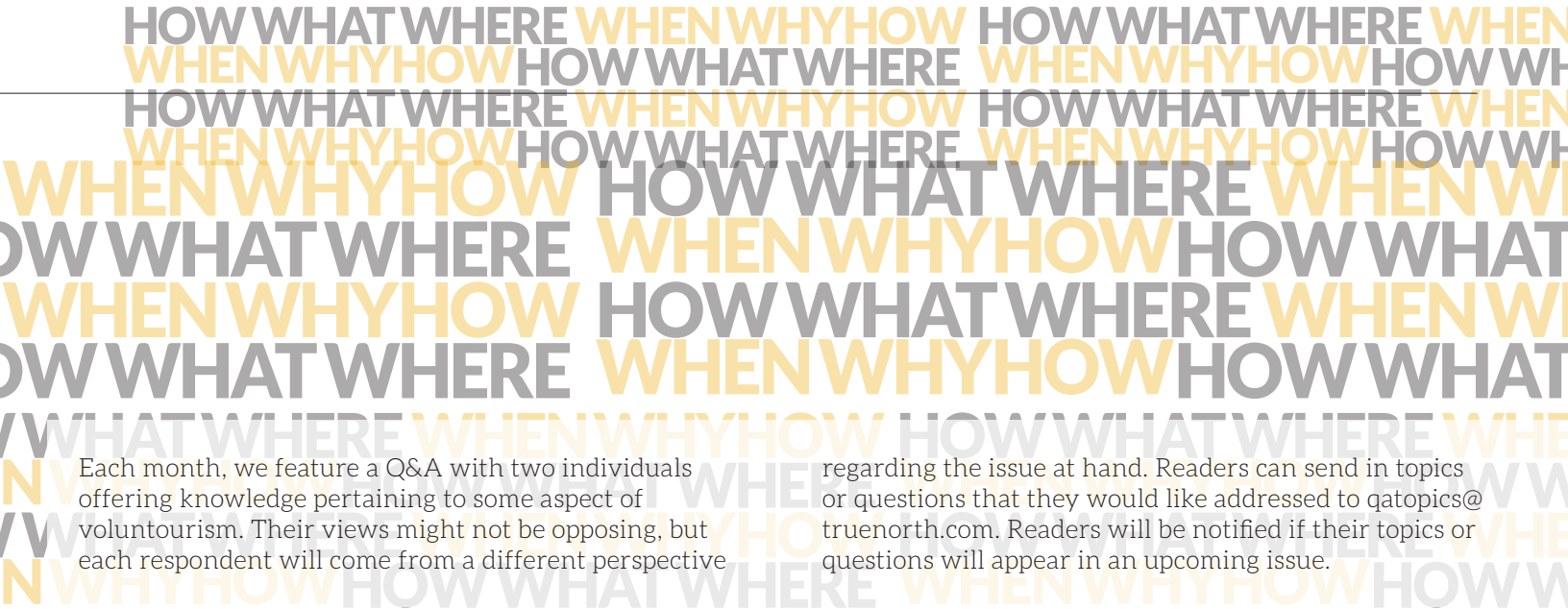
It's completely volunteer-based, and it focuses on admitted project proposals from communities internationally. So, it's leaders in communities who recognize a need, identify that need, and have a proposed solution. Then, they submit that proposal, and a member chapter will partner with that community and make a commitment of at least five years to find the solution with them.

Is there a specialized group of skills that voluntourists should have?

I think it's really simple — they just need to be able to listen, and not just listen, but watch. Being able to let go of paradigms like, "This is how infrastructure should be built, this is how communities should be run, this is how education should be done." It is being able to let go of all these assumptions based on a Western upbringing and being able to look at what was actually there and what was functioning.

Do you think voluntourism as a movement is viable?

I wouldn't necessarily call it a fad, but I would call it a product of our unique place in Western society. People are seeking more meaning in their life because they're very disconnected from any challenge that might define their character or their person. So, I think it's going to last because people still look for meaning in some way; right now, it just happens to be that voluntourism is something that people can use as a venue for self-discovery and to see what's actually going on in the world.



Each month, we feature a Q&A with two individuals offering knowledge pertaining to some aspect of voluntourism. Their views might not be opposing, but each respondent will come from a different perspective

regarding the issue at hand. Readers can send in topics or questions that they would like addressed to qatopics@truenorth.com. Readers will be notified if their topics or questions will appear in an upcoming issue.

UBELONG

What is your role in UBELONG?

I co-founded UBELONG with Raul Roman, a friend from when we were both students at Cornell. Together, we run all facets of the organization. We have projects throughout Africa, Asia, and South America. To offer these programs, we've built and manage a network of over 100 organizations — like schools, clinics, biological reserves, NGOs, etc., as well as great logistics people like drivers, host families, and hostels.

What are the most important areas that volunteers can help with, locally or abroad?

We work in education, we work in care-giving, we work in health, we work in conservation, human rights, so there are a ton of different areas where volunteers can be engaged. You have to know how to engage a volunteer though.

Is there a specialized group of skills that volunteers should have?

Attitude is definitely the most important thing. That sentiment of being really open, of being proactive, and understanding that a volunteer is completely different than a tourist. Everything kind of starts with that. But it depends on the project. We have health projects, and obviously if you're going to be on a health project, then we're only looking for nurses and doctors. If we feel that you have the right attitude, then it's just basically matching up skills.

How does UBELONG implement projects?

We have three programs — a volunteer abroad program, the expedition program, and we're about to launch our corporate program, [which is] getting companies to build up their talent in their employees through international service.

Do you think voluntourism as a movement is viable?

Volunteering done right, absolutely, is here to stay because it really does make a difference on the community and also in the volunteers themselves. As for the voluntourism movement, I don't think it's sustainable or viable in any way just because it's not real. You're promising people the opportunity to make a difference, but they get there, and they really can't. As time goes on, I think real organizations... are basically going to rise above the rest, and all these voluntourism outlets are going to just become the tourism companies that they really are.



Cedric Hodgeman and Raul Roman co-founded UBELONG, a social venture for international volunteering based in Washington, D.C., in 2009. Hodgeman was interested in the project after years of international volunteer work, and Roman had connections across the world as a result of his work with the United Nations and the World Bank. The two have worked, volunteered, and traveled in more than 40 countries, and between the two, they are fluent in English, French, and Spanish.