

Wheel deal

A globetrotting expat is championing a way for fly-in, fly-out workers to bring life-changing resources to those in desperate need

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Tasmanian-raised engineer and entrepreneur Nick Boyd would score higher than most in those nifty online maps where you pin the places you've lived, worked, holidayed and more. Boyd Skypes in for this interview from a pub in country Victoria where he's car camping, mid-winter, with his wife Clarissa Forster. They're taking time out from their Melbourne life to strategise a new venture called AidNet.

They cooked up AidNet on Boyd's latest fly-in, fly-out gig in the southern African nation of Angola. He was working there month-on, month-off on sub-sea engineering in the capital city Luanda and also on offshore operations.

"They say there are three reasons expats do these jobs - I didn't fit into any of them - the three Ds ... debt, divorce and drinking. I wasn't in debt but I needed to pay the bills," he says.

The job offered time to travel and Boyd and Forster took a four-wheel drive and a tent around Namibia and Botswana, adding more pins to that global map. "It was a lot of fun, we love doing road trips, but overall it was a strange life. Stop and start. I couldn't commit to things back home," he says.

Boyd plays the saxophone and the harmonica (a habit he formed at uni in Launceston) and wanted to play in a band. He wasn't in Melbourne enough to do it there, so he started in Angola. "I went to a club on the beach and took along my sax and said to the DJ, 'Can I play?' The next thing, the manager's offering me and all my mates free drinks and food to play music. It was a great experience."

So, after two-and-a-half years of that?

"I was sick of it, really," Boyd says. "One day I was walking through the streets of Luanda, near the office, and I saw this guy crawling down the street with thongs on his hands. Literally crawling along, with his legs all twisted below the knee. I felt terrible for him, but thought there was nothing I could do."

Boyd returned to Australia and had what may prove to be his best light-bulb moment. "I thought, 'Maybe there is something I can do.'"

He rang a hospital in Melbourne, told them the story, asked if they had any wheelchairs they didn't want, scored one and took it back in his business-class luggage to Angola. "The next day I saw the same guy on the street. I said to him, 'Hey, I've got something for you, can you be here tomorrow?'. He came the next day, I brought the wheelchair in on the bus and he was ecstatic. He had never walked in his life, he's 22. He'd always crawled. His name is Manolo."

"The thing I didn't realise until that moment was that the buzz I got out of this was almost more than he got out of it. For the effort I put in, which wasn't much at all, I felt great afterwards."

So he did it again a month later on Forster's next visit. They absconded from an expat pool party and delivered another wheelchair to a young woman named Isabel who was living in a shantytown. Like Manolo, she'd never walked because of polio, which along with landmines is a huge problem in Angola.

"When we got there Isabel's big extended family was there, lovely people. When I brought the wheelchair out, she didn't really understand what it was," Boyd recalls.

"When I put her hands on the wheels and she pushed herself forwards, she had this most amazing look on her face when she realised she would finally be independently mobile. Her three-year-old daughter was pushing her around as well, which was very touching."

"This made me think I could set up a non-profit [entity] to expand on this work, and now I've established AidNet."



In its start-up phase, and based in Melbourne, AidNet uses expat volunteers to bring wheelchairs directly into Angola on their flights. Boyd is concentrating on building supportive partnerships with major oil companies there (including BP), through their corporate social responsibility arms, and local churches - and on building a database to network the volunteer air couriers, hospitals in the West who have spare wheelchairs, and people who need them.

All Boyd really needs now is a big cash injection. It might even bring him back to Tasmania. Forster loves Tasmania, Boyd spent chunks of his childhood at Coles Bay, climbing Mt Amos, and the couple regularly checks in at a friend's solar-powered house at Freycinet.

"We can run AidNet from anywhere," Boyd says.

"So if there was a financial partner or some kind of impetus to get it up and running down there, why not? In the end, it's a website, database, and the marketing required to highlight the service."

That's potentially a great niche for Tassie, he reckons - internet-based businesses that really are global.

Boyd's Tasmanian connections were established in the 1970s and '80s. He was born in London in 1967, where his late father Graham

was a doctor at the famous St Mary's Hospital in Paddington. The family moved to Melbourne in the '70s, then relocated to Tasmania when Boyd was nine, when Graham landed a professorial role at the University of Tasmania. "We arrived on the old ferry, the Abel Tasman, a real thrill as kids," Boyd says.

"My brother Sam and I had a room with a porthole looking out to one of the walking decks. A cunning plan emerged. I asked Sam to go out and stand outside the porthole and watch people as they walked past. An old couple walked past the porthole with a strange look on their faces. Sam followed their gaze ... to be confronted with the sight of my bottom squashed against the porthole," he laughs.

"And that's my first memory of Tasmania."

Next stop for Boyd was Lower Sandy Bay, in a spacious home in what's now a rich-list strip next to the beach. He's the first to agree this was an idyllic setting.

"We'd go windsurfing off the point. Tassie was great to grow up in," he says. "It was a safe place, we had freedom."

But the suburb wasn't totally salubrious. "In those days that was a big wheelie burnout spot. All the bogans would come in their panel

HELPING HAND: Clockwise from opposite page, Tasmanian expat Nick Boyd with the mother of Isabel, a young Angolan woman who received a life-changing wheelchair through Boyd's non-profit organisation AidNet; Boyd off the coast of Angola on a BP installation vessel; Angolan boy Manolo was the catalyst for Boyd's charitable idea and the first beneficiary; and Isabel in her new wheelchair.

vans and play music all night," Boyd says. "But Dad had no fear, he would go out in his pyjamas and have a go at them."

Boyd started school at Waimea Heights Primary School just up the road, then moved down the hill to Hutchins. "Looking back, they were fairly tough on us at Hutchins – and we did have some strange teachers – but it was a pretty good school," he says. "And we went rafting, bushwalking. Some of my best mates here in Melbourne are people I've known since then." One of them, IT innovator Richard Scrivener, is helping him build AidNet's database.

After school, Boyd worked in a credit union for two years and saved up money to pay his own way through university.

"By the time I got to uni, I was ready to do it – and a lot of people there really didn't know why they'd come," he says.

He chose engineering. "I was good at physics and mechanical kinds of subjects in school, and I liked them more. And I've always been interested in aircraft, always looking up at the sky at planes," he says, before starting one of many wild travel anecdotes.

"I did paragliding later on. One day I was in Montenegro flying around and had a couple of near-death experiences, my paragliding wing folded in half, twice in one flight."

He continues: "I studied two years of mechanical engineering at UTAS, and then I wanted to do aerospace engineering but they didn't have a course there. I went to RMIT in Melbourne to finish my degree. I did pretty well at that, but there were no aerospace jobs when I finished so I came back to Tasmania to do a masters in naval architecture, at the Maritime College in Launceston. Then I took a job in Perth in the oil and gas sector, I worked on a hovercraft project, and a whole lot of other things. I worked for Airbus in the UK, in Bristol, working on landing gear and flying into Toulouse and Paris."

After that, Boyd served stints with Hewlett Packard and General Electric in Barcelona and came back to Melbourne in 2006, again to work in the energy sector, then started doing short-term contract work on the east coast of India. Before that work dried up he'd met Forster. "We met through an ex-girlfriend of mine from Tassie," he says. "She set us up on a kind of blind date, we met up in Melbourne and really hit it off. Clarissa's a good mate and that's what you're looking for in the end."

He'd also come up with an invention to harness wave energy – which led to a venture called Aquagen. Boyd pitched the idea to Melbourne-based Martin Buden, who was running his parents' business, a precision-engineering company. His response? "Wow, that's amazing, let's do this! He's a dynamic sort of guy," Boyd says.

Boyd moved back to Melbourne to translate the idea into reality.

"The technology overcomes the key problems with wave energy – technologies which sit on the water surface get destroyed in storms, and those operating on the seabed don't generate enough energy and are very costly to maintain," he says.

"Our technology solved these problems, but we came in after the GFC, so we couldn't get enough investment. We did get some, and a matching government grant, and built a functioning prototype on Lorne Pier in Victoria – but people were nervous about long-term investment, and they still are. There's a lack of appetite for marine renewables in Australia, and everywhere really, so the industry is still in its infancy.

"It's a common story today. Investors can see the long-term value, but they don't want to invest and take risk. Where are the risk takers? It's kind of frustrating. People today expect things to happen fast. That's not good for investment in long-term goals and real change, really good change. So we need to think differently to be sustainable. It's very tough as an entrepreneur, having the best idea doesn't mean you're going to get there."

Perhaps AidNet can become a game-changing exception to the rule. ●

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