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Corporate Giving Turns into Inspired Living

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – While watching American Idol with his 5-year old daughter, alumnus Justin Ahrens '94 decided that his life of “suburban dad and entrepreneur,” was not enough. “How can we help in Africa,” asked Ahrens' daughter. Inspired by “Idol Gives Back”, celebrity Bono's charitable work in Africa and his daughters words, Ahrens embarked on a new adventure, one that would take him across the globe, into the depths of his soul and would materialize into a lifelong mission.



Justin Ahrens '94 visiting in Nairobi, Kenya.

Shortly after graduating from Illinois Wesleyan University in 1994, Ahrens opened the doors to Rule29, a creative design firm located in Geneva, Ill. “Our desire was to create a firm that would make creativity matter to our clients and to our community,” said Ahrens. Although Ahrens loved his job, he felt something was missing. The firm had previously worked with rock legend and director of Solid Rock Foundation, Alice Cooper. Continuing their work with not-for-profits, Rule29 connected with Life in Abundance (LIA), a Christian-community development organization founded in Africa.

Established in 1993, Life in Abundance is present in seven African countries, including Ethiopia and Kenya. Since its inception, LIA has provided health education and clinical care to over 600,000 Africans, as well as offered care and rehabilitation to more than 1,200 orphans in Ethiopia alone. Ahrens believes that “LIA has proven that Africa's poorest people are capable of owning the improvement of their own quality of life.” Some members of Rule29, including Ahrens, chose to travel to Africa in 2008 to witness firsthand how their involvement with LIA is benefiting those in need.

“I was halfway across the world, could not speak the local language and was working in the slums, I could not be further from my comfortable life in the suburbs of Chicago,” said Ahrens. He had traveled thousands of miles to some of the poorest areas in Africa and witnessed “children playing in sewage, mothers with HIV trying to support their kids, and whole communities decimated by poverty, sickness, malnourishment and completely marginalized.”

By 2010, along with working with a variety of clients, the Rule29 staff donated 800 hours of professional work to LIA. The company, comprised of nine members, provided charitable work through brand management to LIA and oversaw their communication and support initiatives. Ahrens is proud of his colleagues, “everyone has contributed to the pro-bono work, whether it be actually doing hands on work, helping with strategy or helping design it.”

Currently, Rule29 staff are assisting with LIA's micro-financing efforts. “We are helping develop products for this program to help generate a sustainable business model,” said Ahrens. In April, Rule29 will debut their second documentary depicting the slums of Africa. A third film, which will be shot in the Sudan in 2012, is in pre-production.

Ahrens is grateful to have had the opportunity to work with LIA and believes that “we have been changed by the work and the response of the people.” He plans to return to Africa next year and hopes that in the future his will family will join him, he said, “my kids really want to go.”

The words of a fellow colleague, “I need Africa more than it needs me,” resonate with Ahrens. “Being there really helps simplify life and helps one realize that the ‘rat race,’ well, is really just that,” said Ahrens.

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