

Calgarian's 'amazing' charity spreads smiles – Woman of Vision

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Mary Tidlund

She's got a smile that can light up a room. It's a well used cliché, but in Mary Tidlund's case, it's pretty darn accurate.

Tidlund flashes her incredibly warm and bright smile easily and often, as she sits with one leg tucked underneath her on the couch of her Canmore home.

When asked how she stays inspired every day to carry out the work of the Mary A. Tidlund Charitable Foundation, which she started in 1998, her face lights up.

She glances out the floor-length windows at the mountain view, unveils that mega-watt smile and states, "Well for one thing, I live in a beautiful place!"

As an avid outdoors person, Tidlund appreciates the majestic beauty of the Rocky Mountains just outside her door, but it's a stark contrast to some of the poverty and pain she has seen in the economically struggling countries she visits to bring aid and support.

Adopted as a young child, Tidlund was raised in a warm and caring Calgary home, one where her parents fostered more than 40 children over the years. She saw first-hand the impact and joy of giving back.

"I learned about philanthropy of the heart from a very young age."

Tidlund describes her home as one full of love, but not necessarily extra funds. She put herself through the University of Calgary, earning a degree in geography, then worked as a landsman for five years before running her own successful oil and gas business. But when it fell victim to an economic slump, Tidlund had a decision to make.

"Either I start another company, or go into business with my partners, or start something totally different that's closer to my heart . . . and that's what I chose to do."

Through her foundation, Tidlund has gone into countries like India, Ecuador and Peru, leading projects in education, water filtration, micro-finance, health care and more.

But, to use another cliché, Tidlund insists it's a hand-up and not a hand-out.

"We believe in supporting others where they have decided already what their need is. It's empowering people so that we can give them education or training and we can walk away and they're running on their own . . . that's our goal. So, it's done with a lot of respect and honour."

Her enthusiasm and belief in her work are clear as Tidlund describes a project at an HIV orphanage in Kenya. Before her foundation arrived, the situation was desperate for those children, and now the 53-year old Tidlund celebrates the changes she has seen.

"No longer are half the kids dying, they're all living, the community accepts them, they've done education programs around the schools . . . it's amazing."

Those success stories convince Tidlund she made the right decision when she chose to follow something closer to her heart. And what she sees in those people that she is helping keeps her focused on her vision.

"People in a lot of these countries have absolutely nothing material and they still will do so much. That is inspiring enough . . . you know, why wouldn't we help them."

Linda Olsen anchors Global Calgary's Early News at 5 and produces the Woman of Vision series, which is in partnership with the YWCA of Calgary. The stories run the first Monday of every month on the News Hour at 6. If you would like to nominate a Woman of Vision, go to www.globaltvcalgary.com.

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