

Lindsey Waters
“Good Intentions”
Lowell Speeches
February 23, 2014

Have you ever started something with good intentions and discovered that it did not work out like you had planned?

During the summer after my sophomore year, I went to Kenya to try to help people living in poverty there. I was working with a non-profit organization that funds and manages sustainable development projects. Each member of our group raised money before the trip. When we got to Kenya, local people submitted proposals for development projects, and we decided which ones to fund.

One of the projects our group selected was the construction of a road in a small rural village called Maragoli in western Kenya. A man named Ahuga explained in his proposal that ‘with no roads, there can be no development,’ and said that the village had suffered economically since it was only accessible by one small, bumpy path. Having a major, nicely constructed road would allow electricity to be installed in the region. Eventually, Ahuga and his neighbors hoped to fill the street-sides with small markets and shops to heighten economic activity in the area. It was a great idea, and it would make a true difference to the community. Since I had shown a lot of enthusiasm and support for the funding of the road project during our group deliberations, I was placed in charge of this project.

The only problem was, I have *no* idea how to build a road.

I showed up on the first day of construction with no plan, no guidance, and no clue where to start. So I stood there looking down a long path of huge rocks and bushes with about ten men from the community standing beside me, waiting for me to give instructions. Finally, one man noticed the baffled look on my face and kindly suggested that we start by clearing a pathway through the boulders. Right. So, we huddled around one of the smallest boulders and all pushed as hard as we could. Nothing. The only way these rocks were going to move was with explosives.

So, the next day we came back with explosives. We placed sticks of dynamite in the cracks between the rocks, hoping that the boulders would break where we wanted. I stood behind a tree about a hundred yards away, and began to lift my arm to signal ‘go.’ At that moment, I suddenly realized *this is not okay*. Here I was, a Harvard English major from a small town in North Carolina, who had never even seen dynamite explode, and I was about to tell these men that they should light explosives like I would light fireworks at home – just spark it and run away, it’ll be fine. No. People’s lives were at stake, and I was responsible.

While this may have been an extreme example, things like my failure as a road-builder happen all the time. Too often, people are motivated by what seem like good intentions –

we want to ‘give back,’ ‘make a difference,’ or ‘do good in the world’ – but we are not able to finish the job. When I signed up for my trip, I definitely did not imagine myself standing behind a tree shielding myself from exploding boulders, but somehow, that’s where I ended up despite the fact that I was not at all qualified. After that moment, I gave up my role as project leader and hired a crew of local workers to finish building the road.

The good news is that the people of Maragoli got the road they needed, and I didn’t blow anyone up. But the memory is not a comfortable one for me; it stings like a lesson learned from a mistake. I should have known from the moment I stood looking down that pathway on the first day of construction that I was not capable of making the project a success, but I was too blinded by my own good intentions, by my own desire to want to ‘make a difference,’ to admit that. In the end, we *can* make a difference, but we have to work harder to understand the problems and support sustainable solutions.