



CANADIANS CHANGING THE WORLD

The connectors

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It might be the quintessentially Canadian act: bringing people together. These trailblazers all make links where none existed before. In doing so, they are helping to build wealth, heal old wounds and save young lives



Marc Foggin: Digging out



When a 7.1-magnitude earthquake struck the Tibetan plateau last April, bringing many of the buildings in remote Yushu County crumbling down, the calls for help went out to the usual sources: the monks in the town's main lamasery, the massive apparatus that is the Chinese government – and a tiny Canadian-Scottish charity.

The town was devastated, with almost 3,000 dead. Outside help was needed, but the government was nervous about foreigners running around the politically sensitive Tibetan plateau. Among the few outsiders known and trusted by local residents and authorities in Qinghai province was Montrealer Marc Foggin, 40, founder of Plateau Perspectives, a non-government organization that had been working in Yushu for more than a decade. The only problem was that Plateau Perspectives, headed by Mr. Foggin and his wife, Marion Torrance-Foggin, was a four-person organization focused on conservation.

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But the couple were eager to help. Within 24 hours, Dr. Torrance-Foggin – an MD trained in her native Scotland – was making the arduous 12-hour overland journey to Yushu from the provincial capital of Xining with a team of medical staff and a carload of supplies. Within days, Plateau Perspectives was running five medical teams in Yushu, treating as many as 250 patients a day.

To ethnic Chinese and Tibetans alike, the 40-year-old Mr. Foggin is an old friend. His father, Peter, was born in China, the child of Christian missionaries. Mr. Foggin himself has been working in and around Qinghai since the early 1990s, when he first arrived to study the Tibetan grasslands and its native species. He acknowledges that his organization must walk a careful line. "The [Tibetan] community welcomes us because we give them an ear. We don't pretend to know what their needs are. And I think the main reason that the government welcomes us is that we agreed to report to them the work we're up to, what we're doing and who our foreign personnel are. So there's a free flow of information. Foreign NGOs who don't communicate with the government create a lot of nervousness."

That hard-earned trust means Plateau Perspectives will remain in Yushu this year, helping to rebuild the medical system as the main town of Gyegu (pre-quake population: 100,000) undergoes a makeover. Part of the recovery also involves bolstering the local tourism industry, which will allow Mr. Foggin to push his other favourite cause – the preservation of the region's endangered wild donkeys and snow leopards.

– Mark MacKinnon

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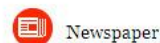
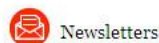
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