



Changing Lives Through Awareness

BY ROGER TUMMINIERI

We talk to Ben Peterson, co-founder and executive director of Journalists for Human Rights (jhr), about the leap of faith he took to defend human rights in Africa.

WHAT WERE YOU DOING BEFORE YOU FOUNDED JOURNALISTS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS?

I was working in Ghana, a country in West Africa. I was based at Ghana's Ministry of Justice, International Law Division, writing Ghana's reports to the United Nations on various international human rights treaties. Before I left for Ghana, I had just finished my Master's degree in political theory from the London School of Economics.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO START jhr?

While in Ghana, I became extremely passionate about human rights issues. I spent my six months there talking to and working with human rights victims – and abusers – daily. I became enraged by the realization that we, in the west, have so many more opportunities than the average African just because of where we're born, and I felt I had no choice but to lend a helping hand. However, I became quite disillusioned with most human rights work being done in Africa – including what I was doing there. There are too many lawyers and politicians talking about

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human rights issues, but not enough is being done to actually improve the lives of those most vulnerable to abuse. So I came to the conclusion that the first and most necessary step to ending rights abuses is to increase public awareness and acceptance of human rights norms. The only way people can start to defend their rights is if they know they have rights in the first place – not a common occurrence in many parts of Africa. I started **jhr** to spread human rights awareness in the most efficient and effective manner possible – through local media.

WHAT OBSTACLES DID YOU FACE?

I started **jhr** when I was 24 years old. My other co-founder was only 23. We really had no idea what we were doing – we were just passionate and knew we had a great idea. We made dozens of mistakes along the way, a trial by fire in some senses. However, we navigated through the land mines and came out the other side intact. Today, the biggest issue we have is fundraising. We're in constant need of funds for our projects. Our work is extremely effective, but because it addresses long-term issues, **jhr** is not as "flashy" as causes that focus on immediate needs, like hunger relief organizations. My argument is that a donation to **jhr** is, in the long run, more effective, because we are addressing the root causes of Africa's issues, not the symptoms.

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WHAT ADVICE CAN YOU OFFER ABOUT STARTING A NOT-FOR-PROFIT ORGANIZATION?

Make sure you have enough passion and dedication for your cause that you won't mind working 100-hour weeks and not making a salary for the first few years of your work. If you can get through the start-up phase, there is nothing more rewarding than looking back and knowing you've improved hundreds, thousands or even millions of people's lives for the better. **ON**

Since its founding in 2002, Journalists for Human Rights has harnessed the power of the media in 15 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The organization is based in downtown Toronto. For more information, visit jhr.ca.