

# health club management

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# Walking alongside a community

Are the charitable efforts of your club one-off events, or are they part of a long-term commitment to make a difference?

**Ray Algar** reports on a remarkable club in Canada

This month I want to share the remarkable story of how the independent Fifth Avenue Club in Calgary, Canada, is making a nine-year commitment to support the growth of communities in the Belo region of western Ethiopia.

## **WHY FEATURE THIS CLUB?**

What appealed to me about this project was the long-term nature of the club's support for Food for the Hungry, its chosen Canadian charity partner.

Darren Kanwischer, owner of the Fifth Avenue Club, had noticed the tendency for some gyms to approach charity as a one-time short-term event, whereas he wanted to forge a long-term partnership that could make a meaningful and enduring impact, touching thousands of lives.

## **IT STARTED OVER A COFFEE**

Kanwischer became aware of Food for the Hungry and its work across Africa through the club's coffee supplier, and was drawn to the idea of 'adopting' the Belo community as part of a sustainable development project.

The purpose of Food for the Hungry is to end poverty one community at a time, and the charity achieves this by 'walking alongside' a community. 'Walking alongside' means the charity doesn't believe in short-term handouts, but instead works to understand the root causes of poverty

and commits to support a community for about 10 years, after which it should be self-sustaining. It therefore seeks donor partners who believe in this long-term approach and who are able to support the funding of health, sanitation, food security, education and local leadership.

## **FRIENDLIEST CLUB IN TOWN**

Since the 1,440sq m (15,500sq ft) Fifth Avenue Club opened in 2006, it has focused on becoming the friendliest fitness venue in the city. Calgary itself is the largest city in the province of Alberta, with a population of 1.1 million at the 2011 census. It's a prospering city that has attracted many of Canada's largest companies, so residents can choose from many different club brands: GoodLife Fitness operates nearby, as do Anytime Fitness, a number of specialist studios, CrossFit and many other fitness providers.

'Friendly' and 'supportive' are therefore two important attributes for this 700-member club as competition intensifies and people make their club choice.

## **EVERY MEMBER COUNTS**

Since 2007, three dollars of every member's monthly membership subscription is donated to Food for the Hungry. These compound over the years, which means this one club has so far donated more than C\$250,000.



The club and other donors are transforming the lives of 40,000 people across nine different villages



I love that Fifth Avenue Club is not only making a difference in Calgary, but also changing lives on the other side of the globe – *Darren Kanwischer*



Members and staff fundraise on top of this via sponsored runs, and the club also donates proceeds when replacing gym equipment. This partnership has become a part of the club's story and features prominently on its website.

"I love that Fifth Avenue Club is not only making a difference here in Calgary, but also changing lives on the other side of the globe in Belo," says Kanwischer.

### A PERSONAL INVESTMENT

Long-term partnerships like this only work when owners, staff and members feel a genuine connection with the project, which in this case is separated by more than 8,000 miles. Kanwischer has personally visited the region four times and so is able to report back first-hand on the difference the club is making, along with mid- and full-year updates from the charity. Kanwischer's family has also been personally sponsoring a child from the area for many years.

### MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The club will continue its support of the Belo community through to its 'graduation' in December 2016 – the point at which the community is untethered from 'charity' and deemed to be self-sufficient. Food for the Hungry characterises this as being this point at which the charity is able to transition from being the 'coach' to watching from the sidelines.



Kanwischer wanted to make a long-term commitment to Belo

### IN A NUTSHELL

Project by: Fifth Avenue Club, Canada

Web: [www.fifthavenueclub.ca](http://www.fifthavenueclub.ca)

Charity supported: Food for the Hungry, Canada

Project status: Ongoing and long-term

Impact: Belo region, Ethiopia

Gymtopia keywords: Clothing and Shelter, Education, Food & Nutrition, Health & Wellbeing



The project in Ethiopia is providing fresh, and readily accessible, drinking water for the villagers

- ▶ When this stage is reached, more children will be flourishing in school, proudly wearing their new school uniforms and possessing all the materials necessary for learning. New water points will not only be providing fresh drinking water, but their close proximity will also mean time previously spent walking for water can now be reclaimed and better invested in activities such as farming, education and also just joyful play. Counselling will at this point be available on HIV/AIDS awareness, food nutrition, women's rights, child marriages and much more, creating a virtuous spiral.



And all this will have been achieved because a health club bothered to care some 8,000 miles away. In all, Fifth Avenue Club and other donors are helping transform the lives of more than 40,000 people across nine villages.

#### WOULD THIS CLUB BE MISSED?

The test of a remarkable club is knowing members, staff and the wider community would genuinely miss it if it were to permanently close – not simply a temporary sense of frustration as an alternative is sourced, but profound disappointment. So let me ask you: 'Do you believe members, staff and the wider community of Calgary would miss this club if I waved a wand and made it disappear?'

#### WHAT'S YOUR CLUB'S STORY?

Among the ocean of clubs and fitness alternatives, what is your business doing in standing for something and using its influence to create some meaningful change?

Once you've created a significant difference, remember to share your story on Gymtopia and see how remarkable things can really spread. ●

#### GYMTOPIA – A PLACE WHERE CLUBS DO SOCIAL GOOD



Gymtopia was conceived by founder and chief engagement officer Ray Algar, who believes the global health and fitness industry has enormous influence and potential to do good in the world, beyond its immediate customers.

The idea of Gymtopia is simple: to curate and spread remarkable stories in which the fitness industry uses its influence to reach out and support an external community in need.

It was created with the generous support of five organisations: Companhia Athletica, Gantner Technologies, Les Mills, Retention Management and The Gym Group. Gymtopia received an Outstanding

**gymtopia**

Achievement Award in the UKactive Matrix Flame Awards 2014. Read more stories and submit your own: [www.Gymtopia.org](http://www.Gymtopia.org)