

Steve Gilbert
Costa Rica Alumnus, 1990

When I was a student at UoFT, I saw an ad for YCI on the subway: ‘Looking for a Challenge?’ At the time, I remember thinking that it looked great but that I had no chance of getting into the program – I was studying science not international development. But like a lot of students I had a social conscience and I really wanted to *do something* to help out in the developing world. Furthermore, a skeptic at heart, I wanted to see for myself the realities in another part of the world and, I admit, I wanted an adventure. To my amazement I was selected to participate in YCI’s first project in Costa Rica. The first step of preparation and fundraising was long and difficult but ultimately rewarding. Funds raised by my group of participants was used to convert some agricultural land owned by a rural high school into a ecotourism park. In the field, we worked alongside volunteers from the community of Santa Elena to build trails, construct an interpretation centre and establish the park. The work we did was real grassroots development – and I loved it. So much so, that I made it my career.



The practical lessons that I learned from my YCI experiences have helped to guide me through leadership positions with development agencies in Costa Rica, Guyana, Cuba and Indonesia. First hand knowledge of how things worked in rural communities, direct experience organizing project activities, coping with difficult or unusual conditions, adapting to life in other cultures, discovering how to be a team player and a leader, learning about my strengths and limitations: these were my YCI experiences. Years later, as the Vice-President of International Operations at CARE Canada I drew upon these learnings in my day-to-day work and, if I have ever been an effective manager in relief and development work, I credit my early experiences with YCI.

Many years after my YCI days, when I was working for CARE in Indonesia I saw a profile on CNN Asia of a development success story: the ‘Santa Elena Cloudforest Project.’ Income from the park had transformed the school with new computers, new materials and equipment, a library and a new, expanded curriculum. And for the community: more employment from tourism, scientific research conducted in the park and a growing sense of the value and importance of their rich natural heritage. These great benefits came through the hard work of many exceptionally hard-working people in the community of Santa Elena and from their local government. But I am tremendously proud of YCI’s role and grateful for my opportunity to get out and *do something* good.