



STV Local

By Rebecca Gordon

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Businesswoman makes commitment to poverty-stricken community



Virginie Brouard on a recent visit to Ethiopia Virginie Brouard

Virginie Brouard, owner of La P'tite Folie, plans to set up charity after donating £15,000 to Ethiopian orphans

Faced with a queue of starving children and a pot of food too small to feed each one, Virginie Brouard was forced to watch emaciated youngsters go hungry day after day.

Throughout her first trip to Ethiopia, the restaurateur had to hold back her tears as she witnessed some of the country's poorest battle to survive.

Two years on, she's returning to the poverty-stricken country for the third time and is determined to make a difference.

Owner of French restaurants La P'tite Folie in Randolph Place and Frederick Street and Le Di-Vin Wine Bar in Randolph Place, Mrs Brouard has donated almost £15,000, most of it her own, to a group of orphans in the north of Ethiopia.

The mother-of-two sponsors 800 children cared for by the Daughters of Charity, a congregation of nuns with whom she stays when visiting the region.

Now Mrs Brouard, who transfers money to the nuns in the town of Mekelle two or three times a year, plans to make her donations more formal, and is hoping to set up her own charity.

She said: "I prefer to give money to the orphanage directly, rather than through another charity; very four or five months I send two, three or four thousand pounds.

"My next step is to try to do it properly; I want to set up a charity with Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator – that way I will be able to set up a bank account and website.

"Most of the money I've given is my own - I'm terrible at asking other people for money. But to give one child a meal a day for a year is just £60 – that's nothing."

Mrs Brouard, originally from Brittany, first chose to travel to Ethiopia after hearing from friends who had made similar journeys.

She continued: "I'd always wanted to do humanitarian work and was attracted to Ethiopia. I found a congregation of nuns - the Daughters of Charity - and when I spoke to the coordinator she told me they needed help with a project feeding orphans.

"On my first day I had to hide because you can't cry in front of the kids. It's hot, it's dusty, the children can't play and they're queuing for food. And the boy at the end of the queue knows he's not going to get any.

“From one year to another I see the same children, but when they come to a certain age they have to manage by themselves which is heartbreaking. At 12 to 13 years old and they are alone and often have to feed babies too.

“Apart from looking after orphanages, the Daughters of Charity have clinics and do a street children project. Every night I was visiting children as young as eight who were sleeping on the street. After a few nights they were actually waiting for me - they’ve got nobody else.

“When I’m there I can’t help but remember I’m only there for only two weeks and then I get to go back to my home comforts. You really wonder – ‘are we in the same world?’”

Mrs Brouard is now planning her next visit to Mekelle, though is also set to bring her 16-year-old son, Milan, to the area in 2013.

She said: “My son has seen the photos but you don’t realise the atmosphere until you there. It’s still a beautiful country but there’s not much you can do.

“I’ve had plenty of people saying ‘can I come with you?’ but in a way it is personal to me. It’s important that you spend a week or two weeks and live with the people there. I would advise anyone to just do it; you will come back completely different.”