



Youngsters being helped by Children On The Edge



Left: Rachel Bentley in a migrant school in Mae Sot, Thailand

Below: A charity volunteer with children in East Timor



# VISIONARY

*volunteer* Inspired by Anita Roddick, one British woman vowed to change forever the lives of the world's most threatened children, writes **Nick Ryan**

It was 1990, just a few months after the Berlin Wall had tumbled and Eastern Europe's most feared dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania, had been executed.

For one young volunteer from The Body Shop it was also the start of a journey that would change her life – and that of thousands of the world's most vulnerable children.

Rachel Bentley was a 22-year-old law graduate when she joined Anita Roddick, the founder of The Body Shop, and a small group of volunteers on a life-changing aid trip to Romania.

"It was Anita's vision to put together a team to go and help refurbish the orphanages."

She adds: "We slept on the floor of a clinic in rural Romania – myself, a friend and Anita and her two daughters. Anita was very motherly," Rachel smiles happily.

Now 20 years later Roddick is no longer with us, she died of a brain haemorrhage in 2007, but Rachel has taken up her mantle.

Championing children's rights, Children On The Edge, the charity which Bentley shaped and now heads, was born out of that first Romanian trip.

Still with strong links to The Body Shop, it has gone on to work with marginalised and vulnerable children across Eastern Europe as well as Asia – helping ravaged Indonesian communities cope

after the Boxing Day Tsunami, building schools for the blind in Bosnia as well as developing "child-friendly spaces" in war-torn East Timor.

Without Children on the Edge's help, many of these youngsters or their families would never gain access to an education, a safe place to play or a chance to recuperate from trauma.

In fact little stops the organisation which has earned a nickname in the aid fraternity as the "Médecins Sans Frontières of the education world".

Inspired by her Christian faith and a desire to be involved in human rights work, Bentley is now focusing her sights on one of the world's most repressive and brutal regimes – Burma.

Ruled by a military junta which quashes all dissent, most famously holding under house arrest pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, Bentley has been travelling to the area since 2006.

"We looked at helping the orphanages inside Burma, but our hands would have been tied by the government. I went instead to the Thai-Burma border, so I could see the situation for myself and decide where and how we could help."

Working with women's groups and teachers inside the border refugee camps, and risking all to travel illegally across the border inside Burma, Children On The Edge supports schools, teachers, builds education and play facilities as well as delivering nutritional aid to the refugees.

Motivated by the desperate need she's seen, Bentley is planning on returning to the region later this year with a noted actor and celebrity.

Together they'll help raise the plight of one of the world's most forgotten nations, the Muslim Rohingya people, most of who have fled attacks from the Burmese regime to eke out a squalid existence in neighbouring Bangladesh and Malaysia.

"It's a massive humanitarian crisis driving these people out. A lot of these kids have no access to education.

"In India, where many Burmese refugees end up, it costs just £20 per year to send a child to a state school but most just don't have that."

Now also a UNICEF child rights consultant, to this day Bentley remembers Anita Roddick's initial vision with fondness.

"It was Anita who suggested adding the word 'Children' to our name, which as usual was her inspired choice."

Today, Children On The Edge is in the happy position of seeing the orphans it first helped in Romania enter the world of adulthood and gain jobs, start families or head off to university for the first time – lives they would not otherwise have been able to lead.

It makes a fitting start to the charity's Let Me Learn, "education as a right", campaign for 2010.

For Bentley, this positive view of the future continues to drive her after all these years. "I'm certain we can bring change," she says. "It's the need that drives me on – knowing that you can bring change to lives."

In Britain, she may as yet be little known, but to thousands of children the world over, Rachel Bentley's name is reserved for a prayer each night.

■ Children On The Edge: [www.childrenontheedge.org](http://www.childrenontheedge.org)

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