



PHILIPPE HOUDARD: PROMOTING SOUTH AMERICAN EDUCATION

During his first few visits to the hillside shums of Rio de Janeiro, Philippe Houdard would tense up as he walked past drug traffickers toting AK-47s, their gazes fixed inscrutably upon him.

“With time, you don’t notice them anymore, the guns turn invisible and it all just blends into the background,” he says. “Our policy is to not interact with the drug lords, but they control the *favelas* [Brazilian shantytowns]. Some of them even have kids in our schools. Since we can’t punish the children for what their parents are doing, we take them in.”

As founder and president of the nonprofit Developing Minds Foundation, Houdard and his organization have been building schools and supporting educational projects in South American countries afflicted by violence and poverty. The goal is to help reintegrate into society thousands of kids beset with adverse situations, including former child soldiers from the red zones of rural Colombia, where guerrillas are still active. Funding for the programs started as a grassroots effort, with a few of Houdard’s friends making donations, but it’s grown into something much larger, engaging corporate sponsors such as the History Channel and the Western Union Foundation. In the past five years, Developing Minds has raised about \$500,000 and changed the lives of 25,000 students.

Formerly an executive for tech companies such as Lucent Technologies, Houdard, 41, dropped out of the rat race to create educational programs in truly severe conditions—a dream he’s had since his days at Harvard University. “There was a point in my professional career when I was spending so much time in airplanes and rental cars and eating rubber chicken in my hotel room that I felt I had completely surrendered my own life,” he says. Originally from a small village in France, Houdard is currently based in Miami Beach and recently launched an electronic payments company called SkyBank Financial, but much of his concentration remains on Developing Minds; he’s now planning on expanding his mission toward inner-city Miami: “Education goes a long way to putting people on the right path, and we know we can do something positive here, too.”

Visit developingmindsfoundation.org.