Franz Gastler’s Goal
NGO teaches soccer and empowers impoverished girls in rural India

By 2009, Franz Gastler had been working in India for about two years, for a business lobby and later for a nongovernmental organization involved in rural development, and was fast becoming disenchanted with desk jobs and NGOs. He wanted to get his boots muddy, to work with children, and to make a real impact on the lives of the impoverished.

“I thought I could do it better,” says Gastler (UNI’05,’05).

Gastler appears to be doing just that. In 2009, he created Yuwa, an NGO that teaches girls to play soccer (called football outside the United States), and promotes health and education. Yuwa, which means “youth” in Hindi, started out with about 15 members, most of them under 13, and has grown to approximately 250 girls 10 to 15 years of age. Several are now coaching Yuwa teams or have gone on to play for the state team. Gastler says the girls have gained confidence, learned teamwork, and become better students.

“Their lives have been transformed,” he says. “We asked them what their dreams were when we started, and nobody had any idea because they hadn’t ever considered any options. But now they’re coming up with excellent answers that kids in the United States would come up with, like astronaut.”

Gastler founded Yuwa while teaching English in a tribal village in Jharkhand, one of India’s poorest states. Jharkhand has among the highest child mortality and malnourishment rates in India, and child marriage is prevalent in its rural communities, according to UNICEF.

Gastler recalls an offhand conversation with one of his students, a girl of about 12 named Suman, about her desire to play football on the weekends. He offered to coach a team if she found the players.

Recruiting other girls turned out to be the easy part. Suman went house to house, gathering cousins and neighbors. But persuading their parents to allow the girls to play required some diplomatic skills. Gastler faced resistance from the women, he says, who rely on their daughters to help them at home, washing clothes, carrying water, and planting rice. He recounts his pitch to the mothers: “I said, ‘I realize I’m not from here, but I keep coming over here and I see this group of guys always playing cards. So maybe the next time the girls leave for a couple of hours to play football, you can ask those boys to help you with the dishes.’ I knew full well they’d never do that—it was a joke. They were laughing, and that was like the icebreaker. In the end, it was give-and-take on both sides.
The girls started doing their work faster, and in some cases, others have picked up the slack."

The girls were eager to begin. They devised the rules and set the schedule, practicing seven days a week during the first year. (They eventually settled for six. The coaches—village boys Gastler had been tutoring—wanted a day off.)

Then they began competing—and winning—beating more seasoned teams like New Delhi and Maharashtra. Seven girls from Yuwa's first team went on to play for Jharkhand's under-13 football team. In a 2010 article about Yuwa, Sports Illustrated India wrote that the state team rocketed to a rank of number 4 in India, up from 20 the previous year. The wins, Gastler says, are a barometer of how much the girls are enjoying the game.

Another sign is the dedication of the girls now participating in Yuwa. They come on foot, some walking for 45 minutes to get to practice, and some on bikes. Average attendance is 22 or 23 days a month. Ten of the girls have become coaches for Yuwa, and four have been picked up by the India national team.

The media and the soccer world have taken notice. Besides Sports Illustrated India, several local newspapers, as well as Bloomberg Businessweek, have written about Gastler and Yuwa. Members of the Philadelphia Independence, a U.S. Women’s Professional Soccer team, have visited the program. And in 2011, Yuwa won a $25,000 microgrant from Nike, through its Gamechangers program, to build a pitch. "The fields we played on were owned by different people, by villagers," Gastler says. "One day you’d come and your field has been tilled and somebody has planted corn there." The organization bought a half-acre plot of land from a local schoolteacher and built a pitch with stadium lights and a classroom that’s almost double the size of the local school.

Gastler believes that Yuwa has changed the lives of its young members. "Before football, a girl is isolated," he says. "In a poor family, usually the girls are poorer than the boys. There are no expectations for girls. They’ll work really hard, and they’ll get married at age 14 or 15 or 16, and they’ll go work really hard somewhere else."

Those expectations are different now, Gastler says. Team captains keep track of school attendance, and girls have been putting off marriage. He notes that the first team, the one Saman organized, included three girls who were a bit older—16 or 17. None of them married until after they were 18, he says. And three other girls from the first team went on to college. Some are determined to become professional soccer players.

"Before football, a girl is kind of standing alone," he says. "After football, she's with a team. She gets a sense of camaraderie, a huge amount of confidence, and a sense of gender equality, maybe for the first time, where we can do the same things that boys can do."

The organization has won fans beyond soccer. Anurag Gupta, inspector general of organized crime at the crime investigation department of Jharkhand, says Yuwa has come up with a way to empower girls.

"I think the girls coming out of the Yuwa program have gained two important qualities: hope and confidence," says Gupta, former state director of sports. "But more important, they have served as a role model for thousands of other girls who are subjected to harassment, torture, exploitation, and various other forms of discrimination on account of their gender, economic conditions, illiteracy, and caste group."

This year, Gastler has expanded Yuwa, adding a team in the Mumbai slum of Dharavi. He wants to create a program to help prepare the most dedicated Yuwa girls for universities or careers. "It would be a bridge program for girls who up until now have not gotten a very good education," he says. He also wants to build an online academy to train those who want to replicate Yuwa in other parts of India.

Yuwa participants have been told "it’s OK to have big dreams," says Gastler. "We’ve stoked their sense of curiosity. Now the really important thing for us is to try to figure out a way of helping them to realize those ambitions." Cynthia K. Bucini

WEB EXTRA
Watch a video about a young Yuwa player at bu.edu/ bostonia.

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MEGAN (BENDER) BOYD (CFA’05) of Novi, Mich., and her husband, John, welcomed their first child, Caroline Melba, on July 15, 2012. Caroline weighed 5 pounds, 10 ounces, and measured 18.75 inches.

LEANNA ERDBERG (COM’05, LAW’08) of Washington, D.C., was named one of the Top 99 Under 33 Foreign Policy Leaders by the Diplomatic Courier and Young Professionals in Foreign Policy, a project launched in 2011 that highlights the impact on international affairs of 99 leaders under the age of 33. Leanna is a regional counterterrorism advisor for eastern and southern Africa in the U.S. State Department’s counterterrorism bureau.

PETER HELTZEL (GRS’05) of New York, N.Y., published Resurrection City: A Theology of Improvisation (Eerdmans, William B. Publishing Co., 2012). Peter is director of the Micah Institute at New York Theological Seminary. The book, he says, "paints a prophetic picture of an evangelical Christianity thateschews a majority mentality and instead fights against racism, inequality, and injustice, embracing the concerns of the poor and marginalized, just as Jesus did.” He calls for “radical change and collective activism modeled on God’s love and justice.” Friends and former classmates can contact Peter at peterhelts@gmail.com.

MICHAEL MCGAGHIE (CFA’05, ’10) of Cambridge, Mass., is a tenure-track assistant professor in the music department at Macalester College. Previously, he was director of choral activities at the Boston Conservatory, assistant conductor of the Harvard Glee Club, and music director of the Concord Chorus.

STEVE MOORE (COM’05) of Conshohocken, Pa., and his wife, Andrea, welcomed a son, Cameron Albert, on November 19, 2011. “Cameron is a fun-loving baby whose first real laugh came during a singing of the BU fight song (yes, really),” Steve writes. “One of his first trips out of the house, at just three weeks old, was to see the Terrier men's basketball team take on Villanova in Philadelphia.” Steve is an editor, page designer, and sports reporter at the Mercury in Pottstown, Pa. Andrea has a PhD in immunology and microbiology and works on gene therapy research at Temple University. Contact Steve at smoore71@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter @smoore1117.