

Changing Lives Around the World

For over 35 years, the Polus Center for Social & Economic Development, Inc., has designed and implemented human service programs and promoted opportunities for persons with disabilities and victims of conflict throughout the world. And the nonprofit organization has worked wonders.

Based in Petersham, MA, the Polus Center began by providing training and residential services to people with disabilities in western MA. In 1997, it entered the international arena by coordinating humanitarian projects in Central America that addressed the long-term needs of people with disabilities, particularly those who lost limbs due to wars, landmines, and disease. Today it's widely recognized for implementing a broad scope of innovative, person-centered victim assistance programs worldwide.

The Polus Center was built into a forward-thinking, globe-spanning agency through the vision, drive, and compassion of Michael Lundquist, a Cambridge College alumnus.

In the early 1980s, Lundquist was working in human services in Northampton, MA, yet he felt unsure which direction his career should take. His close friend Joseph DeFazio, a lawyer and faculty member at Cambridge College, suggested he apply at the College. He started in 1982 and now he says, "It's the best thing I ever did."

"I learned a tremendous amount about organizational development from professors such as Rick Turner," says Lundquist. "The courses all contributed to my thinking about international program design and implementation. The knowledge and experience I gained at the College have been extremely relevant and applicable to all that I do, even to this day."



Onto lands in conflict

Upon completing his M.Ed., Lundquist started as Director of Vocational Programs at the Polus Center, and within a year became its Executive Director. Lundquist sensed Polus could have greater impact helping people with disabilities beyond Massachusetts. Early in his tenure, Lundquist and his colleagues learned that prosthetic limbs, when young people have grown out of them, could not be donated because of product liability. That got him thinking: "Let's collect these prostheses and recycle them in developing countries!"

Polus started a recycling program for prosthetics and soon collected thousands of dollars-worth of components. Next they established a partnership with a prosthetic program in Leon, Nicaragua.

In April 1997, Lundquist and a group of volunteers, including DeFazio, visited the clinic to donate the components. In 1999, Walking Unidos, a small prosthetic clinic, opened in Leon, operated by local leaders and trained personnel, many of whom have lost limbs themselves. Within the next three to four years, they opened up a prosthetic clinic in Honduras, a larger one in Managua, and the Leon Wheelchair Workshop.

Founding principles

Polus' projects are rooted in and guided by two humane outlooks. In using a "Person-Centered Holistic Approach," Lundquist explains, "we go through a very rigorous planning process where we actually interview potential service beneficiaries. We invite them to help design the service and gear it to their most pressing needs. This is the antithesis of a 'one size fits all' approach."

The other approach, "Social Role Valorization" (commonly referred to as SRV), as formulated by Wolf Wolfensberger, PhD, in 1983, aims to create or support socially valued roles for people in society. The approach maintains that people with disabilities who are in devalued roles are often demeaned by society and thus treated poorly. Valued roles can positively impact the self-esteem of vulnerable people and elevate their status in society. To counteract general prejudice against people with disabilities, Polus helps landmine survivors and people with disabilities to achieve valued social roles in their communities through.

Moving forward

The Polus Center's victim assistance work now includes training and direct rehabilitation services, including prosthetics and orthotics, wheelchair fitting, and trauma counseling, as well as supporting grassroots

The mission of the Polus Center for Social & Economic Development is to strive to create opportunities for persons with disabilities and members of other vulnerable groups to become valued citizens within their communities.

economic and educational opportunities for victims of conflict.

Over the years, the Polus Center has received support from the U.S. Department of State Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement as well as non-government agencies and foundations to address the devastating impact of landmines and other explosive remnants of war (ERWs) on victims of conflict around the world.

Polus is currently working in Colombia, Jordan, and Tajikistan and expanding into the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Colombia, the second largest exporter of coffee in the Western Hemisphere, has the third highest rate of landmine victims in the world. Landmines are particularly concentrated in the mountainous coffee areas. In 2008, the Polus Center piloted a program to support landmine victims in remote coffee communities by helping them access rehabilitation services and economic support. The center initiated the Coffeelands Trust, a public-private partnership that supports coffee farmers impacted by armed conflict throughout the world.



Since 2010, Polus Center in Jordanian and Syrian rehabilitation facilities in Amman, Jordan, has provided direct support of victims of conflict across the region and trained rehabilitation staff in prosthetics/ orthotics; physical therapy and trauma counseling.

In 2016, the Tajikistan's National Mine Action Center presented training in prosthetics, wheelchair fitting and seating, and quality assurance; disseminated rehabilitation equipment and materials; provided new artificial limbs and delivered small grants to landmine survivors.

This year Polus expanded into the Democratic Republic of Congo, which has a burgeoning specialty coffee industry in its eastern region. They're helping to develop a mill, a cupping lab, and a vocational school that will be inclusive of victims of conflict.

The Polus Center, which has maintained its presence in Massachusetts, is also currently partnered with the North Central MA Workforce Investment Board to implement the Disabilities Employment Initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Labor. It continues to offer residential services to help people with disabilities and seniors stay in their homes and avoid nursing or group homes.

Moving toward social change

Lundquist has an abiding interest in instilling social change. He feels that the process that helps vulnerable people raise their social value actually improves the attitudes of both victims and the community around them. Polus' work often encompasses advocating for the people that Polus has already aided.

Among his "phenomenal stories of success," he points to the story of a young woman in Leon who was in high school using a wheelchair. She feared, however, that issues of access and discrimination might prevent



her from continuing her studies. Polus stepped forward to provide her with two prosthetic legs, which enabled her to go to high school and graduate with honors. They advocated for her admission to Nicaragua's most prestigious school, the University of Leon. She went on to earn her Ph.D. and she now teaches at the University's medical school.

Doing extraordinary things

Last spring, Lundquist spoke to a group of Cambridge College students about Polus and its work. He was bowled over when he stood before an audience of about 100 people. In his view, the large turnout signaled that there was considerable interest in international development within the Cambridge College community.

"As I always tell people," says Lundquist, "ordinary people can do extraordinary things. I see that all the time. My message to the students was 'Never doubt yourself. You can do extraordinary things if you put your mind to it.'"

"I've seen him work," says DeFazio, "and somehow Michael can be a visionary, think of big ideas and the mission, yet his real focus is helping one person, to truly make a change in a person's life. Polus never loses sight of the fact that what they're really doing is dealing with human beings." 