

Two brothers, who lost their parents in the 2004 tsunami, have launched a flip flop brand to support other orphans around the world.

‘We just want to create something positive’

Rob and Paul Forkan were only 17 and 15 when they hitchhiked, frightened and barefoot, 200km across Sri Lanka to the airport with their younger brother and sister after tragically losing their parents in the 2004 tsunami. The family had travelled across India and the sub-continent for years – parents Sandra and Kevin wishing an alternative education for their children built on experiencing different cultures – before deciding to spend Christmas in a small fishing village. The following morning the wave struck, claiming an estimated 230,000 lives around the world in a number of countries. Rob and Paul survived by clinging to the roof of a hut. Their parents managed to get Mattie, then 12, and Rosie, eight, to safety before being swept away.

“That day changed our lives forever,” says Rob Forkan, but he and Paul were determined to find a positive in the tragedy.

Supported by relatives and friends, they finished their education, got jobs in London and went travelling again. They were looking for ways they could ‘give back’, and struck on the idea of a footwear brand that would donate 10% of profits to children in developing countries through a charitable arm, Orphans for Orphans. “We spent years travelling in flip flops, whether it was backpacking around the world or at festivals – it suited who we are, it seemed to be a good match,” explains Rob.

After waking up at a festival and exclaiming he had a mouth like ‘Gandhi’s flip flop’ (a humorous term meaning a dry mouth), the boys had their brand name – albeit with a spelling change to avoid causing offence. “Some people understand the humour in the name, some don’t, but even if they don’t, the name gets worldwide recognition and has a good ring to it.”



Registered charity Gandys Foundation runs Orphans for Orphans. It has already paid for a teacher, healthworker and classroom supplies in India. CREDIT: GANDYS

But setting up a brand from scratch is not easy. The original plan was to make the shoes from jute, handcrafted in India. "We wanted something a bit different, which is where we came up with the idea for the rope strap. We were trying to put something on the market that nobody else had."

However, they hit stumbling blocks: the materials, the manufacturing, the quality and the lead times were not up to the desired standard. "Everything that you wouldn't want to happen was happening, so we went back to the drawing board. I think a lot of people might have just given up then, after we'd had a lot of headaches, but we said 'no, let's carry on' and kept pushing it from there."

The drawing board entailed trawling alibaba, the global supplier website, where they discovered lead times, the technology and designs could be vastly improved on by switching to a rubber product and to China. The alibaba move would prove more valuable than they could realise: a designer friend was looking for a company to feature on an alibaba advert and they were selected as a case study. The advert showed worldwide – including Canada, Australia, and the US, and enabled a power shift.

"We began to have manufacturers knocking on our door, rather than us trying to convince them," explains Rob. "Rather than them saying 'you need to order a minimum of 10,000', for example, it gave us some bargaining power to say, 'if you want to work with us we need to try it out.'" After some due diligence, a supplier from Fuzhou was selected due to its ability to scale-up production as the brand grows.

Retail growth

The next step was getting the product into retailers. They were turned down by the larger stores at first, but switching to a 'woven' strap and building momentum for Orphans for Orphans through social media is beginning to pay off. Gandys won the Footwear and Accessories Design category at the recent WSGN Awards, a prestigious London-based fashion event, and has secured House of Fraser, ASOS, Topman and Selfridges among stockists. Virgin owner Richard Branson liked the idea so much that his staff and guests now wear Necker Red Gandys flip flops on his private island. Famous fans include US film star Jessica Alba and singer Niall Horan from One Direction.

In November, Peter Simon, the founder of retailers Monsoon and Accessorize, who was born in Sri Lanka, travelled with the brothers to the country – the first time in its 30-year history that Accessorize has collaborated with another brand, as well as the first time the brothers had been back there since the tragedy. Although it was extremely difficult, particularly as it was straight after a major typhoon in the Philippines, "we just want to try and create something positive out of a bad situation", says Rob.

Mr Simon introduced the brothers to SOS Children's Village in Philiyandala and Pahamune House in Narammala, both of which support children in Sri Lanka who lost parents in the tsunami, and which will benefit from a percentage of the profits of Gandys sold in 18 countries through Accessorize.

The brothers encountered a boy who had also lost both of his parents in the tsunami and who had initially been taken into care by relatives. "The locals explained our story to him and even though there was a bit of a language barrier, we saw his face drop once he heard our experience, and saw tears well up in his eyes. We only knew his pain too well."



The design includes a woven strap and logos to remind the boys of their parents: A kingfisher for their father and a footprint for their mother. CREDIT: GANDYS

After the tsunami, with his relatives unable to look after him, he had ended up in a home, where he had been abused. "Hearing that after a horrific tragedy things didn't really get much better was incredibly upsetting for us. This really highlighted for us why Gandys exists – so that any child will be cared for properly after experiencing such an event."

Children's home

Only a year and a half in, the project has funded a teacher and a nurse in India and bought school supplies for 100 children. The goal, however, is to fund a children's home in Goa by the end of this year – the 10th year anniversary of the tsunami. They have recently received a £250,000 investment from Dominic List, who appeared on the UK TV programme Secret Millionaire and who made his money in technology solutions.

"We work around the clock, and to do what we've done in such a short space of time has taken a lot of hard work," adds Rob. The boys have said they know their parents would be proud of what they've achieved. There is a footprint in the logo to represent their mother's favourite poem, Footprints in the Sand, and a Kingfisher, their father's favourite beer. "If you meet anyone in retail or footwear they can't believe what we've achieved in a year and a half, and it's because we've got that driving force behind us."

They are on target to meet their goal, with sales rising from 70,000 in 2011 to 250,000 in 2013. And while projections "keep changing because so much is happening", this year sales are expected to reach between 400,000 and 500,000 pairs.

"Nine years ago when we were travelling home from Sri Lanka, we didn't have any shoes on our feet," adds Rob. "Now, we are returning not only with shoes on our own feet, but with a flip flop brand and a global partnership that will help thousands of children have a brighter future." 🌀