

The Parable of the Starfish

By Philip Baum

My late uncle, David Baum, was a paediatrician. He was Professor of Child Health at Bristol University, Founding Director of the United Kingdom's Institute of Child Health and the first President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. He passed away prematurely in 1999, suffering a fatal heart attack whilst leading a charity bike ride to raise money for child health in Kosovo and Gaza; he believed that peace would only be achieved in war zones if communities could be self-sufficient in terms of healthcare. Since his death a charitable foundation has been set up in his name, the David Baum International Foundation (www.dbif.org), to improve the health of children in disadvantaged areas of the world.

David was an inspiration to all within the family and was highly respected by his peers and patients, both in Bristol and around the globe. In 1968 he invented the 'Silver Swaddler', a heat-preserving foil sheet still used to protect premature babies against the detrimental effects of rapid heat loss. The long-distance race runners amongst our readers may also be familiar with a variation of the product as they are often handed out to people as they cross the finishing line. However, the reason for this sudden display of nepotism is that it provides me with the opportunity to relate the parable he often told...the parable of the starfish:

As an old man walked the beach at dawn, he noticed a young boy picking up starfish and putting them into the sea. He asked him why he was doing this. His answer was that the stranded starfish would die if left until the morning sun. 'But the beach goes on for miles and there are thousands of starfish,' countered the old man. 'How can your effort make any difference?' The young boy looked at the starfish in his hand and placed it safely into the waves. 'It makes a difference to this one,' he said.

The parable has been used widely and it featured in many of the obituaries that were written subsequent to David's death; he truly

tried to make a difference to as many people as he could, despite the odds and regardless as to how many people were queuing up for care.

It is also a parable that I have used when training screeners, aircrew and security management personnel and it is one that seems to resonate with most who hear it. The challenges we face are enormous and there is no way that we can prevent every attempt to commit an unlawful attack against civil aviation. Yet the argument that there is no such thing as 100% security can often lead people to question "what's the point". Even in my own lead editorial in this issue, I asked what the point of passenger screening was if we were not addressing the issue of perimeter security?

Motivating staff is an ongoing challenge. Making each and every member of the security team feel that they have an important role to play is essential. And for that very reason, we need to broaden their remit.

Many security managers still link aviation security measures solely to counterterrorist activity. They downplay the unruly passenger issue as being insignificant when compared to the threat posed by religious fundamentalists and they distance themselves from the fight against human trafficking, drug smuggling and the actions of psychologically disturbed individuals, all of which result in criminal activity taking place on board aircraft every day. Of course, identifying the next Mohamed Atta is a worthy goal, but to many it might seem to be more of a pipe dream.

So, let's try and promote a different mindset, not one excessively fixated on preventing a 9/11-style atrocity, but one of making a difference to our own communities and of having a positive impact on those we interact with. For management, they can take pride in making people feel valued members of a team that is not simply ticking the regulatory boxes. For the front line personnel, at checkpoints, in control rooms and in-flight, they can start to believe that their tasks are truly achievable – that they might stop a child being trafficked into a life of forced labour, that they might identify an intoxicated passenger and they might perform their duties in such a way as to make the security process less arduous for the passenger. After all, we all know of the positive impact a friendly word can have and how the attitude of a screener can make or break the travel experience.

I often ask myself why I have spent my entire professional life in aviation security, why I am so passionate about the need to profile passengers (rather than pursuing the more lucrative route of supplying equipment) and why I am keen to develop programmes that can help counter other crimes perpetrated in the skies or by people using aviation as a mechanism of getting from A to B in order to commit a crime. I think the answer lies in the parable...despite all the setbacks and frustration, I'd like to make a difference. I'd like to improve security. It might not be quite as noble as improving child healthcare in Kosovo and Gaza, but it makes my job satisfying and worthwhile. Surely that is worth setting as a goal for all employees within our industry? ■