

# Rebel

writer JUDY CHAPMAN

## WITH A cause

“When you are in a position of leadership it is important that you use your influence wisely and for the good of the wider community”

THESE ARE WORDS SPOKEN BY SELF-MADE BILLIONAIRE AND SELF-CONFESSED REBEL, SIR RICHARD BRANSON.

Many of us are aware of Sir Richard Branson's success with award winning Virgin Atlantic formed in 1984 – now the second largest British long-haul International airline. Then there's Branson's Megastore company, which includes music retailing, Internet, book, film and editing services as well as travel, hotels and cinemas. More recently he has expanded into the hotel and leisure industry. With more than 100 companies in 23 countries, at last count the combined sales of all Virgin holding companies exceeded 4.7 billion pounds.

There's more to this man that meets the eye though. Branson is living proof that financial wealth can create global change. In the summer of 2004, for example, he launched Virgin Unite as a vehicle to pull together all the resources of the Virgin Group internationally to tackle some of the tougher challenges facing the world today. Branson is also a trustee of several charities across the world including the Virgin Healthcare Foundation, a leading health care charity which was responsible for the launch of a health education campaign relating to AIDS in 1987.

“I am fortunate enough to meet many inspiring people in my life,” he says. “From well-known leaders such as Nelson Mandela to some of my wonderful staff around the world, I find inspiration in the many different people and places that I visit. The key is to act when you are inspired and do something about it.”

‘Doing something about it’ is one of Branson's strengths. He personifies a can-do attitude. While he readily admits that he has made his share of mistakes, he has also changed many things for the better, and it is for his successes rather than his failures that he is known.





## BRANSON IN AFRICA

"I have spent a lot of time in Africa. It is a magnificent country, but it's got problems. Some 20 percent of South Africans are HIV-positive. In Botswana, the number approaches 40 percent. These people will die unless they get anti-retroviral drugs. It's imperative that we help. In the last few years we have opened a school of entrepreneurship and a clinic in South Africa to try and raise awareness amongst the people and give them some of the solutions to halt the spread of this terrible disease."

He has also set up the Heaven's Angels project in Sub-Saharan Africa to raise funds to create an army of health workers on motor-bikes that can reach people in remote rural communities who may be suffering from the 'big three' preventable diseases, HIV and AIDS, Malaria and TB.

## VIRGIN UNITE

Making a difference is at the heart of Branson's life and indeed for those working for his companies. Virgin Unite, for example, is an independent charitable arm set up by staff and partners to 'harness the energy and resources of all staff across the board to make a difference at a global and local level'. The mission is to face the

tougher and less well-known issues that many shy away from – creating social change at a grass roots level and connecting with real people.

Last year, Branson's mother, Eve, joined members of Virgin Unite on a trip to South Africa visiting clinics and in the Alexandra Township and watched her son open the first gym with equipment donated by Virgin Active. In her words: "Crowds were gathering at the gate, curious to see just what was happening, when suddenly they burst into song, and together with Richard and the rest of the Virgin team, carried on dancing and clapping with joy for the sheer fun of it all."

Branson has long been famed for his rebellious antics and is famed for saying "rules are meant to be broken". Think locally act globally is part of his agenda. He is affiliated with dozens of partners across the world to support underprivileged families and children and with his initial funding of various projects, has helped raise over £100 million through campaigns such as Comic Relief and many other charities.

## GLOBAL WARMING

However, he remains very serious about issues like global warming. "I believe I have a responsibility to raise the awareness of global issues and do what I can to help, mainly by moving others to do something," he says. Passionate about the environment, he is constantly persuading people to realize how serious this is and to do something about it.

"I encourage everyone in a position of leadership to make sure they help to create a movement that will make change happen."

Branson recently launched a company called Virgin Fuels that is looking at alternate fuels, and a US\$25million reward called Virgin Earth Prize for anyone who can find a way to extract emissions carbon from the atmosphere. "One of the most enlightening and inspiring people I have met recently is Tim Flannery who was recently named Australian of the Year for the work he has done in raising awareness of the very real issue of global warming. Tim has inspired me to act and I have done so in a number of ways."

**"The key is to act when you are inspired and do something about it"**

## branson...

### ON BUSINESS

Conventional wisdom says to specialise in one area and don't stray, and that the best businesses stick to their core. If you look at the top 20 brands in the world, it's true – Coke, Nike, Microsoft. But personally, I think rules are made to be broken. The Virgin brand has diversified successfully in to many areas from travel to entertainment, telecommunications and health clubs. So my advice would be – don't always follow convention.

### ON KEEPING HEALTHY

I love a good hit of tennis and enjoy a game every day when I am on Necker Island. I also love to kite surf, which is something that I have spent time in Australia enjoying with my son Sam. I also love skiing and sailing. I travel a lot so I try and stick to three meals a day and make sure I enjoy some of wonderful local cuisine in the many and varied countries that I visit. I used to avoid airline food, until I started my own and made sure we had fabulous meals with healthy options for those who travel a lot and like to eat light on their flight.

### ON SPA

A spa should be a place where people can unwind and relax. We have wonderful spas in our Virgin Active gyms – a place where people can go to unwind and leave their thoughts behind them. My most memorable spa treatment was my first ever massage from our in-flight beauty therapists on board our Virgin Atlantic flights.

### ON HOLIDAY

I spend most of my work life travelling so my vacations are about spending time with my family and my friends. For me, a holiday is often about getting my family and friends together at home and enjoying some time away from the busy world around us. Australia is one of my favourite places and I was lucky enough to spend a month on Sydney Harbour this year with my wife Joan and my two children Holly and Sam.

### AT HOME

Necker Island (pictured below) is my health and spiritual retreat and one of the most beautiful places in the world – I am lucky enough to call this home.



Last year, at the Clinton Global Initiative summit, Richard Branson pledged US\$3 billion for developing energy sources to combat global warming, initiating a search for ways to use renewable energy within his company and on investments in bio-fuel research, development, and production. Also targeting projects to tackle emissions contributing to global warming, he is striving to minimise not only the global warming footprint his companies inevitably create, but also make it easier for others to follow his example.

## THE SPA LIFE

Spa-wise, Branson is on the mark. Virgin's flagship spa at Natirar, a 500 acre estate of a retreat located in Somerset, New Jersey is set to launch soon in the US. It's philosophy? To give guests the 'freedom and means to hear out whatever your passion dictates'.

Of course Virgin Atlantic were the first global airline to launch in-flight massages. In-flight beauty therapists (IFBTs) have been onboard since their inaugural flight from London to Los Angeles in 1990, after Jane Breeden (VA's first IFBT) approached Richard Branson with the idea in 1989. She thought it would be a great way to relax passengers and minimise the effect of jet lag. Today, guests flying Upper Class can choose from in-flight treatments including pressure point massages, anti-aging hand manicures and the Ayurvedic-inspired 'Back in the Clouds'.

## FINDING SANCTUARY

Branson also has a collection of boutique luxury hotels located in Africa and a restored Moroccan retreat Kasbah in the High Atlas region. However, it's Necker Island, a 74-acre private island in the British Virgin Islands in the Caribbean where he spends most of his downtime.

"Necker Island is my home and my sanctuary. It's my haven away from the busy and public life that I lead when I am travelling around the world promoting and working with the many Virgin companies. On Necker I can exercise, eat well, breathe fresh air and also get some work done. I have hundreds of emails a day that need responding to; it is nice to have a beautiful and peaceful place to think clearly. I do a great deal of my work and thinking from there."

Naturally, with more than 100 companies in 23 countries and projects tackling issues as huge as AIDS and global warming, the endlessly driven Branson's 'holidays' include work. He is truly an inspiration to people all over the world – a world that he is tirelessly helping to make a better place. 🌱



## GET INVOLVED

### hiv & aids

There are currently 40 million people worldwide are now living with HIV and AIDS. More than 25 million have died from the disease, four million in 2004 alone. Africa is home to 15 million AIDS orphans. Go to [www.virginunite.com](http://www.virginunite.com) and get involved.

### global warming

Last year Branson pledged US\$3 billion for developing new energy sources to combat Global Warming. "We have to wean ourselves off our dependence on coal and fossil fuels. Our generation has the knowledge, it has the financial resources and as importantly it has the will power to do so."

"Richard's commitment is groundbreaking not only because of the price tag – which is phenomenal – but also because of the statement that he is making: clean energy is good for the world and it's good for business," Clinton said at the Clinton Global Initiative conference.

Go to [www.clintonglobalinitiative.org](http://www.clintonglobalinitiative.org) and click on What You Can Do – and get involved.