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## New vacation option: volunteer adventure

By Mara Fink  
mfink@pioneerpress.com

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Jodi Nelson (Submitted photo)

St. Paul resident Jodi Nelson was hiking near the base of Mount Kilimanjaro in December 2006 when the idea hit her: The company she wanted to create would combine volunteering and active adventure. It was in Kenya that Nelson began her networking to create what would become Play It Forward Adventures, an adventure travel company.

In line with the nationwide trend of "voluntourism" or volunteer-based traveling, Nelson adds a twist: active adventure.

On each trip, participants spend part of the time on

volunteer activities like building a house or teaching English and the rest on active adventure like hiking, biking and kayaking.

Nelson, 33, says this volunteer/adventure combination is not only the way she prefers to travel but also provides important experiences for those on her trips.

"These types of experiences are personal-growth experiences," she says. "We're pushing people out of their comfort zone a little bit — physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally."

Play It Forward will offer its first adventure to Guatemala in October. On this 10-day trip, which costs approximately \$1,840 excluding airfare, participants will spend two to three days building a house near Antigua and then bike, hike and kayak during the remaining days. Nelson's company will partner with Common Hope, a St. Paul-based organization, for project materials for the home.

A dozen participants already have signed up. They come from all walks of life — couples, single people, young professionals, stay-at-home moms and recent college graduates — but they all are interested in making a difference and using their vacations to do good.

Andy Reynolds, 38, who owns a graphic design and animation company in Minneapolis, says he is travelling to Guatemala because he wants to work with others who wish to give their time and says he hopes to gain a broader perspective of the world.

"The desire to contribute is probably pretty universal," Reynolds says. "It crosses every boundary: age, gender, race, ethnicity and economic lines."

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Jodi Nelson kayaks Lake Atitlan in Guatemala in June 2007 during an exploratory trip for her company.

Play It Forward is a for-profit company. Nelson says she believes there is a big difference between simply donating money and actually going on a trip and donating time; so instead of starting a nonprofit business, Nelson decided to use a for-profit business model that could provide support and resources for nonprofit groups. The name of the company refers to the "pay it forward" concept, which encourages people to commit



On the trip to Guatemala, Nelson and others helped build a house.

## BUSINESS PLAN

Nelson started researching new job opportunities while she was a film and television producer living in Los Angeles in 2006. After hiring a life coach, she began focusing on creating her own business. Her ideas ranged from starting a production company to opening a dog day care; also in the mix was an adventure travel company.

During this time, Nelson took back-to-back trips — an active adventure to Argentina and a volunteer-based visit to Kenya. In Argentina, she enjoyed the exercise and challenge but was disappointed by the lack of cultural exposure. In Kenya, it was just the opposite.

With this realization, Nelson decided to create a business that combined both interests. While in Kenya, she began talking to people about the possibilities. After she returned from her trip, she really dug in. She moved back to Minneapolis and started the company in January 2007, and in June of that year, she led an exploratory trip to Guatemala.

random acts of kindness for strangers.

"For me, it's not about giving money," she says. "It's about the exchange and connection that's made when you offer your time and your energy and your money as a full package. I think there's a lot to be learned on both ends when that exchange occurs."

Nelson set some criteria for selecting projects travelers will do. They need to be short-term projects that have a long-term impact and have tangible results the participants can see. Nelson gets recommendations for projects through many sources: from friends and colleagues, from organizations she has worked with and from reputable Twin Cities companies.

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## EAGER TRAVELERS

Participants on Play It Forward adventures are welcome to donate to a charity or to the people whose project is benefitting from their work, but all of the volunteer project costs are already paid for through the cost of the trip.

Nelson also says she has designed the tours to be eco-friendly by limiting the number of travelers, having participants hike to locations and asking them to minimize their luggage.

Linda Kantner, 50, and her husband are registered to go on the trip in October to Guatemala to help build a house and bike, hike and kayak. Kantner says the Nelson's enthusiasm and the challenge of a trip appealed to her.

"The way she talked about the (physical activity) we'd get to have seemed both a little bit beyond our abilities but also something we could strive for," she says.

Reynolds, the Minneapolis business owner, agreed. "Jodi's enthusiasm for volunteer travel is pretty contagious," he said.

Play It Forward's other adventure for 2008 is an exploratory trip to Tanzania during the Thanksgiving holiday. The 15-day trip will include volunteering with the One Woman, One Goat program, which helps women who have lost children to AIDS gain economic independence, a safari and a bike tour. Other plans include trips to Chile, Argentina and Kilimanjaro.

For more information visit [pifadventures.com](http://pifadventures.com) , e-mail [info@pifadventures.com](mailto:info@pifadventures.com) or call 651-493-8817.

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