

# WESTSIDE Stories



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A fishing trip ten years ago led to 100 children from around the world (twenty countries to be exact) getting a new lease on life through heart operations provided for free to them. On that fateful day, two old friends, Chip Oswalt and Ray Wilkerson, spurred by the pro bono surgery that Chip's group, Cardiothoracic and Vascular Surgeons, had done on six children from Kosovo, hatched the idea for HeartGift. Now, that organization operates several chapters and is getting ready to provide surgery for its 100th patient. Children from twenty countries worldwide have been brought to Austin for procedures.

Here's what HeartGift does—they identify children from around the world who need a life-saving heart operation, bring them to Austin with the mother, do the surgery, and house them with a volunteer family during the recovery period. "The only costs are for the hospital usage and any other fees that may arise," Chip says. All the medical work is done by the physicians pro bono. Last year, in Austin alone, \$2 million in medical services were donated. And now HeartGift has chapters in New Orleans, San Antonio and Houston, with Dallas being readied to begin its operations. (Ray notes that when he heard about the mission, one man in Dallas made the initial six-figure contribution to begin the program there.)

When asked about where they find housing for the kids, Chip says, "One arm of our mission is for our staff to

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find families who will house the children. We'll go to churches, service organizations, schools, or through universities where we make contact with families and interpreters. For instance, when we have a Chinese child, there is a Chinese community that is very well organized in Austin and they have been very helpful." Once they find a family who will house a child, Chip notes that they will typically want to do it again. In fact, the 100th kid who is being brought to Austin from Nicaragua is staying with a Spanish-speaking Elgin family that is participating for the fifth or sixth time. "She's arriving on Mother's Day," Ray says. "That's fitting!" "The outpouring of help has been fantastic," Chip adds. "Some of the surgeons are friends; some are people I know through the fraternity of heart surgeons."

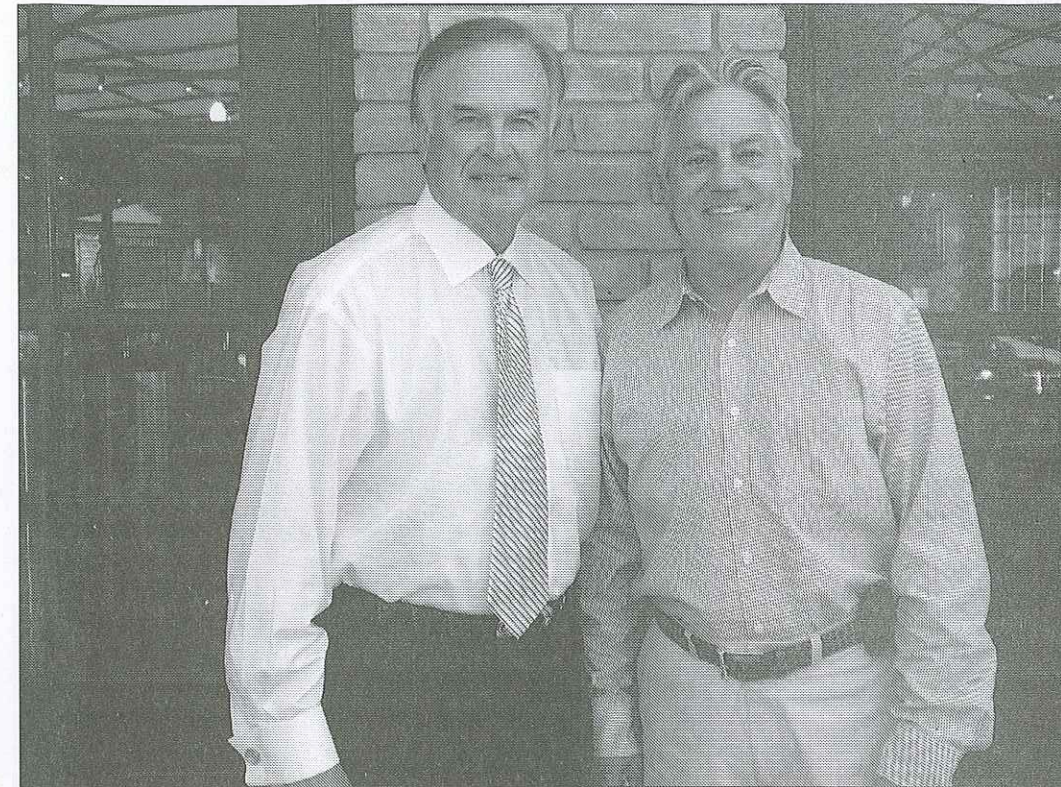
The goal laid down by the HeartGift Foundation Advisory Board was to raise funds for one chapter annually over the next five years. That goal is being achieved. Ray takes care to point out that "At HeartGift, 95 percent of the funds raised go straight to benefitting the children. Only 5 percent goes for administrative costs. We can't even estimate what we have gotten from our board and other vol-

unteers in in-kind services."

It costs HeartGift between \$15,000 and \$25,000 per child to get the operations done. Normal costs would be over \$136,000. "Dell Children's Hospital and Seton have been wonderful. They accept the children for a flat rate fee of \$15,000." Dr. Kenneth Fox actually performs the operations and nurses, cardiologists, anesthesiologists and other medical professionals pitch in their time. Chip and Ray added that airlines have been very generous with them as well. Often, if a child has other problems, like dental work that needs to be done, a dentist will pitch in and help – in another instance a back surgeon worked on a child with scoliosis.

"The function of the organization is crucial in taking care of the administrative details. It takes care of so much red tape. They have contacts with the State Department, children's hospitals, the physicians, volunteers for interpreting, and support for fundraising," Ray says. The 30-person advisory board for HeartGift is committed to finding funds to make new chapters a reality. Everybody on both the advisory board and the foundation board is active and donates at their level of expertise—legal, marketing, whatever.

## Dr. Chip Oswalt and Ray Wilkerson



Ray Wilkerson and Chip Oswalt, the founders of HeartGift

The process for dealing with each child is pretty well set at this point. First, they get an echo of the heart. Most of the time, they get a printout or a videotape and look at it. Then they get a visa for both the child and mother. After airline tickets are secured either through donation by the airlines or someone stepping up to pay for them, housing is found, always with a family that speaks the same language.

Ray says that if someone wants a true "religious experience," they should come to the hospital and see the child and mother going in and then seeing them walk out with a new lease on life.

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ated. He had one change of clothes with him to bring to the United States.

Another story—a Palestinian mother had to smuggle her child into Egypt so that she could catch the airplane. That involved carrying the kid across a river.

They have also operated on a 12-year-old Tibetan monk who had an elder monk accompany him to America. "That was an experience," Chip says. "This child was chosen when he was an infant to be a monk. The established monks walked through a marketplace, stopped and pointed to him and said that he is a chosen one."

Chip and Ray are quick to point out that the connections made through HeartGift bring about a better understanding of what other people in the world are experiencing in their lives. People of all religions – Buddhists, Muslims,

Hindus, Christians – have been involved in providing volunteer services.

"When you think downstream about what all these kids and their families are going to think about America when they go home, it's pretty heart-warming. Whether they are in Iraq or Palestine or Kenya—it's a win-win for everybody. Chip smiles when he tells of the Chinese child who had never been on an airplane before, but the American Airlines attendants took charge and sheltered him through the whole process. "When he got here, he fell in love with Ronald McDonald—and as soon as the operation was over, he started asking for a Happy Meal." Also, his father had taken a lot of grief back home because everyone told him his child would be sold as soon as he got to the USA. When his son came back, that idea was discounted forever.