

# Don't underestimate UNESCO— or the power of women



Veronika Hrabankova

I shall never forget the 31st General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It took place only a few weeks after the terrorist attacks on Manhattan and Washington. The atmosphere before the opening was very tense, and all the delegates from the Arab states felt apprehensive, lest the terrible deed reflected on them.

At the time I was President of the General Conference in Paris and very much aware of what was at stake. I was, and still am, convinced that one of the aims of the perpetrators of the terrible attacks was to drive a wedge between the Islamic and the Christian worlds. At the time, the UNESCO General Conference was the only one at governmental level that was not postponed.

Thanks to words of wisdom uttered by President Jacques Chirac of France and others at the beginning of the conference, and the fact that practically all the delegates were educated, enlightened people of good will, a good working atmosphere was established. The resolution against terrorism was adopted unanimously and work went on in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect. (I intentionally avoid the word 'tolerance', as in my opinion it is not enough to tolerate, one has to try to understand and respect others.) Thus UNESCO played a crucial role at a very difficult time.

Now the US has rejoined UNESCO after many years of absence. It left the

organization at a time when the Soviet bloc wielded enormous influence. Today, democracies are in the majority, and the reason for staying away from UNESCO no longer exists. The US's return is significant for many reasons. No doubt its financial contribution will be more than welcome. But the US will also bring fresh air into the organization as Americans are 'doers'. This will widen their horizons and give them the opportunity better to understand the situations that developing countries face.

The preamble to UNESCO's constitution states: 'Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed. Ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war.'

UNESCO is often criticized for its lack of efficiency, for the fact that too big a slice of the budget goes to the Paris Secretariat. Yes, it is a mammoth institution—but it has undoubtedly been allotted a mammoth task, a task that is perhaps of greater importance today than ever before.

## HUMAN RIGHTS

For many, UNESCO is connected only with the protection of our cultural, natural and intangible heritage. Yet the delegates from every continent keep stressing that the main pillar of UNESCO is education. For, without education, a more enlightened attitude to life and human responsibilities cannot be achieved. In the less fortunate countries of Asia and Africa, access to education and the acquisition of basic skills is a decisive condition for growth towards prosperity. Their intellectual potential will never be fully realized until the people have access to education.

Another of UNESCO's tasks that people do not fully appreciate is the support of human rights. The Committee for Conventions and Recommendations deals with human rights violations. It often has very satisfying results thanks to the fact that it works in strict confidentiality and never brags about a success. So countries that make concessions or release a prisoner of conscience do not lose face and are more

willing to cooperate with the committee. Anyone can send a complaint to the committee on a specific case without waiting for the so-called 'domestic remedies', which in some countries exist only on paper or not at all.

UNESCO also endeavours to support all activities that contribute towards greater understanding of peoples in this troubled world of ours.

## DEADLIEST POISONS

The strongest and deadliest poisons that plague humanity are hate and greed. Not much can be done about greed, but we should do our best to break the vicious circle in which hate, distrust and prejudice against nations and peoples is handed on from one generation to another.

Women can play a decisive role in this endeavour. They have enormous power as they can shape the minds of young children, both at home and at school, as most primary schools teachers are female. If women took it upon themselves to break the vicious circle of hate and prejudice, this world would be a happier one.

I intend to propose such a global movement of women to UNESCO when the opportunity arises. I don't know whether I shall succeed. But at least people will think about it, and some action might result. In any case, I hope that some readers of *For A Change* might respond to the idea. I shall welcome any suggestions and initiatives. (Write c/o the Editors.)

Do not underestimate UNESCO. The organization's aim is a better quality of life on our planet and the enhancement of human dignity. As I stated at the 30th General Conference, over which I had the honour to preside: 'Whoever violates the human dignity of another loses his own; whoever elevates the human dignity of others enhances his own.' ■

*Jaroslava Moserova is a playwright and politician, and former Senator in the Czech Republic. A medical doctor and burns specialist, she has also been her country's Ambassador to Australia and New Zealand.*

## Next Issue

Lead story: *For A Change* visits Moldova to look at a programme that aims to equip young people for a democratic future.  
FAC Essay: Does doing God's will lead to losing your identity?  
Guest Column: Dr Yaw Adu-Sarkodie, Ghanaian Aids specialist

# FOR A CHANGE

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## AFFORDABLE HOUSING

# Repairing the carpet of community



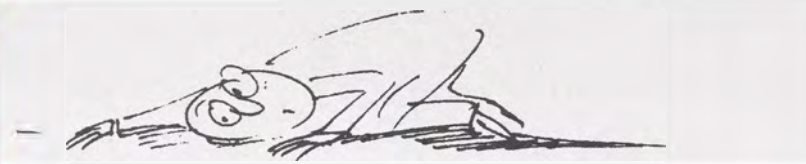
**Suresh Vazirani:**  
succeeding in  
business without  
corruption

The crisis of maleness

Women conquer  
unscaled peak

UNESCO's role





**MAIDEN VOYAGE**

Sailing between the rocky pine-clad islands of Stockholm's archipelago on my way to Tallinn, Estonia's capital, I was reminded strongly of my first trip in 1990, as the Iron Curtain began to crumble. We sailed on the maiden voyage of the ill-fated *Estonia*, which sank in a storm in 1994 taking more than 800 souls with her, a tragedy that united Estonia and Sweden in grief.

The first voyage was a joyful one, carrying many Estonians on their first trip home for many years. I well remember one old man as he greeted a sister, whom he had not seen for 46 years, on the quay in Tallinn.

The Baltic Sea is small—the distance from Stockholm to Tallinn is shorter than to Gothenburg on Sweden's west coast. The different countries' histories have been interwoven from earliest times and the fall of communism has led to a dramatic process of re-orientation.

**BALTIC NECKLACE**

This time, I went to Tallinn for a conference on cooperation and reconciliation in the region. Knud Simon Christensen, a Danish journalist, talked of the necklace of nine countries around the Baltic, and the role of small countries, whom no-one suspects of power politics, in building trust. Dr Markus Österlund of Helsinki University spoke of the need to look back and understand history in order to be able to move forward. Professor Erik Terk, head of the Future Studies Institute of Estonia, commented on the upcoming referendum in Estonia on joining the European Union and

stressed the need to concentrate on the EU's content, quality and values.

**BOTTLED TIME**

During World War II Sweden received many refugees from the Baltic region. Recently a Swiss tourist found a bottle containing a letter which had been thrown into the sea by an Estonian refugee in Sweden 60 years ago. 'Is the war over?' asked the letter-writer, Maja Westerman, writing of her longing for her family in Estonia. Apparently she was living on the Swedish island of Gotland. Efforts are underway to check the authenticity of the letter but, whatever the outcome, it's a reminder of one role neutral Sweden was able to play at a dark time in Baltic history.

**'THE BEST OF US ALL'**

With these words, Margot Wallström, Sweden's EU Commissioner, described Anna Lindh, our foreign minister,

shortly after her murder in a Stockholm department store.

A possible future Prime Minister, Lindh represented the best of Sweden's political tradition of openness and closeness to the people. A newspaper editorial wrote of her 'honesty, straightforwardness and care' and added, 'for her, people were important'. The mosque in Stockholm dedicated its Friday prayers to her, the first time this has been done for a Swede.

**SAINTLY CELEBRATIONS**

Earlier this year I was one of 5,000 people—including the Swedish royal family and politicians—who attended an ecumenical service at the castle of Vadstena to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the birth of another great Swedish woman, St Birgitta.

The Pope recently made her one of three woman patron saints of Europe. A mother of eight, it was only after her husband's death that she was

free to take up fully the calling she had first felt as a child. This led her to Rome, where she lived the rest of her life and founded the Brigittine Order. She spoke out fearlessly on the politics of the day, challenging the Pope to return from Avignon to Rome. Her message, 'Lord show me the way and make me willing to walk it' is a challenge to our secular times.

**NATURE NAMES**

Swedes love nature and are very knowledgeable about it. They will not only tell you a bird's name, but how it sounds in the morning, its nesting habits and from where it has migrated. Their worship of nature is illustrated by some family names. Wouldn't you like to be surnamed 'Aspen Grove' (Asplund), 'Lily Leaf' (Liljeblad), 'Flower Beach' (Blomstrand), 'Mountain Stream' (Bergström), or how about simply 'Twig' (Kvist)? ■



**COVER:** Children at the Mary Tyler McClenahan Childcare Center at Winchester Greens in Virginia  
**PHOTO:** Better Housing Coalition

**FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK**

**Don't do as I do**

**'A**dolescence is the time in our lives when parents become most difficult.' Jack, 15, is one of 500-plus teenagers who gave their views to *The Times* for four days in October, about what it is like to be young in Britain today.

It is striking that few seem to regard their parents as friends they can confide in. One comments wryly that whenever he's invited to a party, his parents say, 'I hope you're not drinking too much,' as they reach for another bottle of sauvignon blanc. Some express their pain at coming from broken homes.

It all makes sobering, even daunting, reading for someone whose child is rapidly approaching the teenage years.

One thing that parents and their children have in common is that they are both on a learning curve. It requires a fair degree of grace to treat your child as you would have them treat you—with honesty, respect, patience, love and lightness of touch. Yet it is sometimes harder to draw a principled line than to go with the flow. As 14-year-old William from France astutely observes, 'Just remember that all teenagers want independence but it is the parent's job to limit the amount you give us.'

It's no use invoking how things were when I was young. 'We were never asked what clothes we wanted to wear when we were your age,' cuts no ice with a generation who are bombarded with TV commercials, fashion-aware magazines and peer pressure. And for, 'I'd never have dared to say that to my parents,' read, 'What did my parents have that I lack?'

It's a challenging thought, but probably true, that children learn far more from watching their parents than from listening to them. I have never forgotten seeing my father go out of his way to apologize to a park attendant to whom he felt he had been rude. I'm sure I would have been less impressed had he explained to me how wrong the park keeper was and how right he was.

If I want to give my child the best that I can, it is not enough to buy them lots of computer games and fashion accessories. I need to have time for them, to apologize when I handle things badly or lose my cool (even over the history homework), and to have a sense of social responsibility. Above all I need to live out the ideals I profess.

*Kenneth Noble*

[www.forachange.co.uk](http://www.forachange.co.uk)

**FOR A CHANGE**

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**FOR A CHANGE**

■ closes the circle between faith and action, action and faith. It is for anyone, anywhere, who wants to make a difference to the world.

**FOR A CHANGE BELIEVES THAT**

- in a world torn by ancient hatreds, the wounds of history can be healed.
- in the family and the workplace, relationships can be transformed.
- in urban jungle or rural backwater, community can be built.
- peace, justice and the survival of the planet depend on changes in attitudes as well as structures.

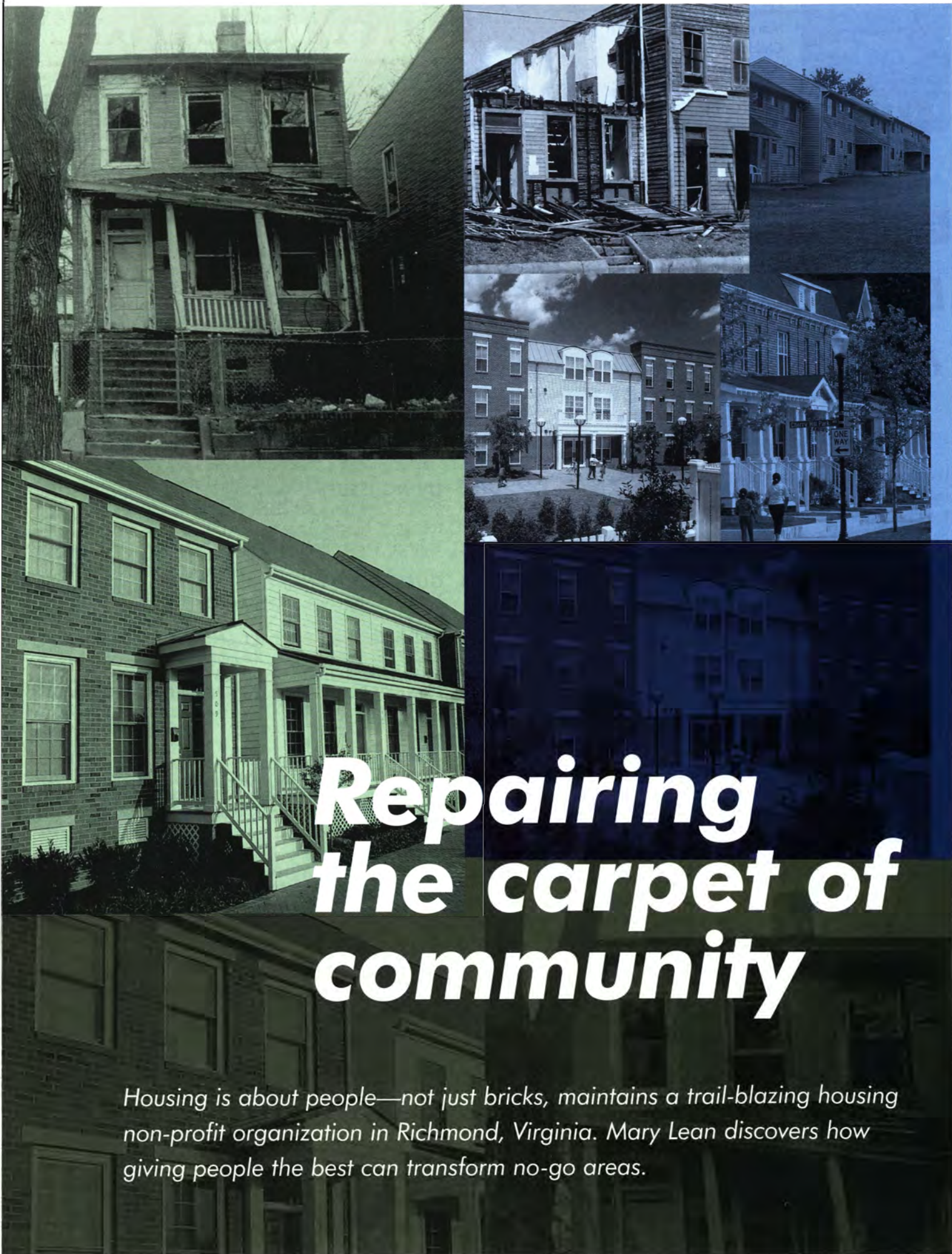
**FOR A CHANGE**

■ draws its material from many sources and was born out of the experience of MRA, now Initiatives of Change.

**A NOTE ON INITIATIVES OF CHANGE**

Initiatives of Change (formerly Moral Re-Armament) works for moral and spiritual renewal in all areas of life. It was born out of the work of Frank Buchman, an American who believed that change in the world must start with the individual.

Initiatives of Change is open to all. Its starting point is the readiness of each person to make what they know of God and eternal moral values central in their lives. This personal commitment to search for God's will forms the basis for creative initiative and common action: standards of absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love help to focus the challenge of personal and global change. These ideas have given rise to an international community of people at work in more than 70 countries in programmes which include reconciliation; tackling the root causes of corruption, poverty and social exclusion; and strengthening the moral and spiritual foundations for democracy.



# Repairing the carpet of community

Housing is about people—not just bricks, maintains a trail-blazing housing non-profit organization in Richmond, Virginia. Mary Lean discovers how giving people the best can transform no-go areas.

BHC

If you want to improve the lives of the poor, housing is the place to start, maintains TK Somanath, the Executive Director of a remarkable coalition in Richmond, Virginia, USA. The Better Housing Coalition (BHC) has regenerated some of the city's most notorious areas over the last 10 years and provided homes for 700 families and individuals.

For a low-wage earner in the United States, the chances of renting a home are pretty bleak. A low-income family, with one fulltime earner, cannot afford to rent even a modest one-bedroom apartment anywhere in the country, says Somanath. In Richmond, for instance, you'd have to work 14 hours a day, seven days a week at the minimum wage (\$5.15 an hour) to pay the rent.

These figures are based on the assumption that people should not have to spend more than a third of their income on housing. According to Somanath, one in seven households in the US spend more than half their income on housing—and every year 100,000 low-income apartments in the US are demolished, abandoned or upgraded to a higher rent band.

Affordable housing, he says, is the key to everything. Take education, for instance. Families who cannot afford to pay their rent move around a lot—from one set of relations to another, for instance, or after constant evictions. Their children miss out because they keep changing schools—nearly a third of American children whose families earn less than \$10,000 a year attend at least three schools by the age of eight. Providing good low-income housing is an education strategy, he maintains.

In a city like Richmond, where Somanath is based, poor housing is often a race issue. Federal policy after World War II favoured racially and economically homogenous neighbourhoods. As more affluent (and often white) residents moved out to the suburban counties, poor (and often black) families remained in the inner cities in public housing schemes or private apartments rented from absentee landlords.

In 13 years with the BHC, Somanath has seen this trend begin to be reversed, as improved housing has raised its occupants' sense of pride and responsibility, and thus stimulated neighbourliness and reduced crime. As neighbourhoods become more attractive and less dangerous, businesses and middle-class families have begun to return. In those years BHC has invested over \$50 million, raised from government, banks, businesses, trusts and individuals, in housing and services.

## GIVING SOMETHING BACK

Somanath plunged into housing issues soon after he arrived in the US from Mysore, India, in 1971, as a 25-year-old civil engineer. Unable to find work in New York, he took a Greyhound bus south, and lost



Mary Tyler McClenahan, founder of the Better Housing Coalition, with young clients of the Childcare Center in Winchester Greens

his luggage somewhere between Washington and Richmond. The bus driver suggested he find a bed at the YMCA in Richmond—and he and his wife, Muktha, have made the city their home ever since.

Somanath worked as a surveyor, and then applied for a job at the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority (RRHA), the agency responsible for public housing in the city. The interview included a tour. He was horrified to see people living in tumble-down houses, with dirt floors and cold water. 'I was really surprised that in a country of such wealth there were huge pockets of poverty,' he says. Nearly 30 years on, there are still 400,000 families in the state of Virginia with housing problems.

By 1990, he was the authority's Development Director. He had built up a reputation for creating dialogue between the city authorities and the communities they sought to serve. So when a local philanthropist, Mary Tyler McClenahan,

TK Somanath: 'We have connected citizens back into the democratic fabric.'



Blair Curmeck

launched the Better Housing Coalition to 'rebuild communities that have long been forgotten or ignored', Somanath was an obvious choice for Executive Director.

With the RRHA, Somanath had managed \$30 million worth of projects. BHC's budget in 1990 was \$100,000. Moving from the security of a big institution to a fledgling non-profit was a big decision, but one about which he has no regrets. 'I wanted to give something back,' he says. 'When I used to bump into people from the Peace Corps in my home town in India, I used to wonder how these people left all their material comforts to work in the villages. I have been able to translate some of the beliefs so dear to me in terms of creating a just society.'

Another factor, he told the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, was a decision he made while his four-year-old son was fighting leukemia. 'Somewhere along the line, when he was suffering, I made up my mind to do something worthwhile with my life.' His son recovered and is now married and living in Florida, while his daughter, whose wedding took place this summer, lives in Virginia. Somanath is a Hindu. His son's illness, he tells me, gave him a 'special relationship with the Almighty'. 'Life is a journey: we must make the best use of it.'

## ROUGH EDGES EXPOSED

On the day that Somanath takes me on a tour of BHC's housing developments, Hurricane Isabel is bearing down on Richmond from the coast of North Carolina. As we drive through the wind and rain, Somanath listens out for tornado warnings on the radio. By next morning, the hurricane will have left 1.8 million people without power, hundreds of thousands without water and 1,200 houses damaged by falling trees.

Most of Richmond has taken the morning off to clear their porches and



Residents in front of the senior apartments at Winchester Greens

backyards of moveable objects. But BHC's offices are manned, to Somanath's pride and delight. We meet Carol Jackson, BHC's Director of Property Management, who is checking up on the residents of the coalition's housing developments. 'She has young twins,' Somanath tells me. 'I didn't expect to see her at work today.'

Jackson has been working with BHC for the last five years, after spending her early career in public housing. 'BHC's mission fitted with mine,' she said. 'I'm not too keen on the private sector: residents aren't their priority. I think you should pay more attention to your residents than to the bottom line.'

The office where we meet is at the heart of BHC's first major project, Cary 2000, in a neighbourhood which was dismembered when the Richmond downtown expressway was built in the 1970s. This, in Somanath's words, left 'the rough edges of the community exposed'.

'In the early Nineties people didn't walk these streets,' says Somanath. 'Housing conditions were deplorable, there were drug dealers and gangs. People couldn't borrow money or get homeowners' insurance. Pizza companies wouldn't deliver.' The corner of Cary St and Meadow St was particularly notorious.

**HUMANSCALE**

In 1990 some of the 'live wires' in the community heard about BHC and asked for help. 'We started having meetings and they told us how the community had been 30, 40 years before. They told us that if we could take care of the corner of Meadow and Cary, then we could do just about anything.' As a first step BHC approached the city council and got the corner's zoning changed from commercial to residential. Then they helped the community to persuade the city

to set up a police station there and to get the police out of their cars and onto the beat.

They raised funding, started to buy up properties from absentee landlords and worked out a neighbourhood plan with the residents. Then they began to build. Many long-term residents were afraid that they would be unable to afford the rents of the renovated houses, so BHC raised the money to subsidise rents and minimize displacement.

BHC's architects go for traditional Southern designs, with porches where people can sit out, watch the street and chat to their neighbours. The residents seem to like this: in BHC's flagship development, Winchester Greens, there is hot competition to rent the houses with the largest, wraparound porches.

**'BHC prides itself on the fact that you cannot tell a resident's income by looking at their home.'**

The aim, says Somanath, is to create 'walkable, humanscale neighbourhoods'. In Winchester Greens, which was built from scratch, the roads have been kept narrow to encourage neighbourliness. The houses have a 5-star energy rating—so as to be light both on their inhabitants' pockets and on the planet. Wherever possible, BHC uses recycled materials. 'I'm very concerned about the way we consume resources in the US,' says Somanath. 'If each of the world's inhabitants consumed as much as the average American, humanity would need four more planets, he says.'

Today Cary 2000 has 86 rental

apartments and town homes (terraced houses), eight single-family homes and a community resource centre where children can come after school to do their homework and use the computers. This helps to address the digital divide which excludes poor children from the educational benefits of the Internet. The centre also serves as a base for BHC's property management staff, its social work team, and for programmes which offer financial and budget counselling for residents.

A couple of weeks before I visit, there has been a community fair on the very corner which used to be ruled by the drug dealers. The residents have taken back the streets, and newcomers are even choosing to live in the community. Just down the road, someone has bought a house for \$280,000.

'It took almost 10 years to see results,' says Somanath. 'It's a really patient block by block building process: there are no quick solutions.' He compares the work of regenerating a community to repairing an oriental carpet.

Somanath and Jackson reckon that BHC's holistic approach is 'kind of unique'. 'We don't just build a building and leave it. We stick with the building and community.'

For instance, says Jackson, if one of the older residents isn't paying their rent on time, she arranges for the social worker to make a home visit. 'She may find the early stages of dementia or depression. At that point she can call in the family and discuss the situation and put them in touch with a network of referral agencies who can support the person in place.' Although sometimes evictions are necessary, in response to flagrant lease violation or drug activities, BHC's approach can often avert a crisis.

BHC has empowered the residents to lobby the council and demand services such as policing, schools and street lights. 'We have connected citizens back into the democratic fabric,' says Somanath.

At first, says Jackson, people were afraid to call the police, for fear of repercussions from the criminals. The police would often give their informant's identity away by arriving at their front door to report. To avoid this, the community resource centre has set up a telephone tree, so that calls to the police, initiated by worried locals, can be made by someone outside the neighbourhood.

**NIMBY SYNDROME**

Alongside family homes, BHC has prioritized affordable housing for the elderly. By 2010, 19 per cent of Richmond's population will be over 60—and there is a critical shortage of suitable housing. BHC has set up four retirement communities, with some 300 affordable apartments in all.

The Columns on Grove, a beautiful renovation in the fashionable Fan District

of downtown Richmond, is the pearl in this collection. The buildings, erected at the turn of the last century as housing for Episcopal women, are on the national register of historic buildings. They were later converted into a nursing home, which stood derelict for 10 years after it closed in the Eighties.

When BHC came up with the idea of converting the buildings into seniors' housing, there was some local opposition, based on the fear that the development would undermine local property values. BHC engaged the community in a six-month dialogue and then embarked on a tasteful renovation. 'Local people are now bringing their parents to live there,' says Somanath. The apartments, with rents of \$325-500 a month, stand next door to houses which sell for up to \$700,000 and, far from depressing values, are credited with raising them. 'We can't do any more affordable housing in this area because we have been priced out of the marketplace.'

We drive on to Church Hill, site of Richmond's first settlement and one of the US's largest areas of preserved 19th Century housing. Alongside an upmarket sector of mainly white homeowners, it had a rundown area of public housing. Four hundred houses stood empty.

BHC has renovated some of these houses and built new homes on the site of an abandoned supermarket. Once again it had to engage with the NIMBY ('not in my back yard') syndrome. After months of 'delicate negotiations' with concerned locals, BHC agreed to blend in with the neighbourhood's style by incorporating nine foot ceilings, wooden rather than PVC windows, and metal porch roofs on some properties. The community also insisted that 50 per cent of the homes should be for owner occupiers.

'It took a lot of patience and staying power, but it worked out,' says Somanath. 'Once the homes were built, the city provided brick pavements, new trees and street lights.'

While building so many homes for sale may have been a concession, helping poorer families to make the leap to home ownership is one of BHC's core objectives. It helps first time buyers through the labyrinth of mortgages and grants. It adds its own interest-free mortgages, which only have to be repaid if the family sells the house before 15 years are up. People can become BHC home owners for a down payment of less than \$1,500.

**CHILDCARE CENTRE**

Our final visit is to Winchester Greens, winner of the prestigious Maxwell Award of Excellence from the Fannie Mae Foundation. Unlike BHC's other major developments, Winchester Greens is situated not in Richmond City itself, but in Chesterfield, one of the suburban counties



Fence painting party in Church Hill, Richmond

which surround it. Here BHC demolished a complex of decrepit Sixties housing, and replaced it with attractive town homes and seniors' apartments. The development also includes a childcare centre, swimming pool, fitness centre and other amenities. Since the first buildings opened in 2000, crime has fallen by 80 per cent and violent crime by 90 per cent.

As always, BHC started out on the development by consulting the community. They found that most households were run by women, who were unable to go out to work because of their children. So BHC's first step was to build a childcare centre, open from 6am to 6pm, with an income-related fee scale and space for 140 children. They also drew in government schemes to help people back into work. As a result the proportion of households who depend totally on welfare has dropped from 40 per cent to 5 per cent and average incomes have trebled.



Carol Jackson (left) with BHC's Integrated Property Management Systems team

**GIVE PEOPLE THE BEST**

Transport was also an issue. Because of the lack of public transport, low-wage earners who live in the suburbs of US cities often find themselves spending over a quarter of their income on running cars. The proposal that Chesterfield County should lay on a bus service met with considerable opposition initially. In the end, BHC won through—although the service has since been reduced owing, the county argues, to lack of finance.

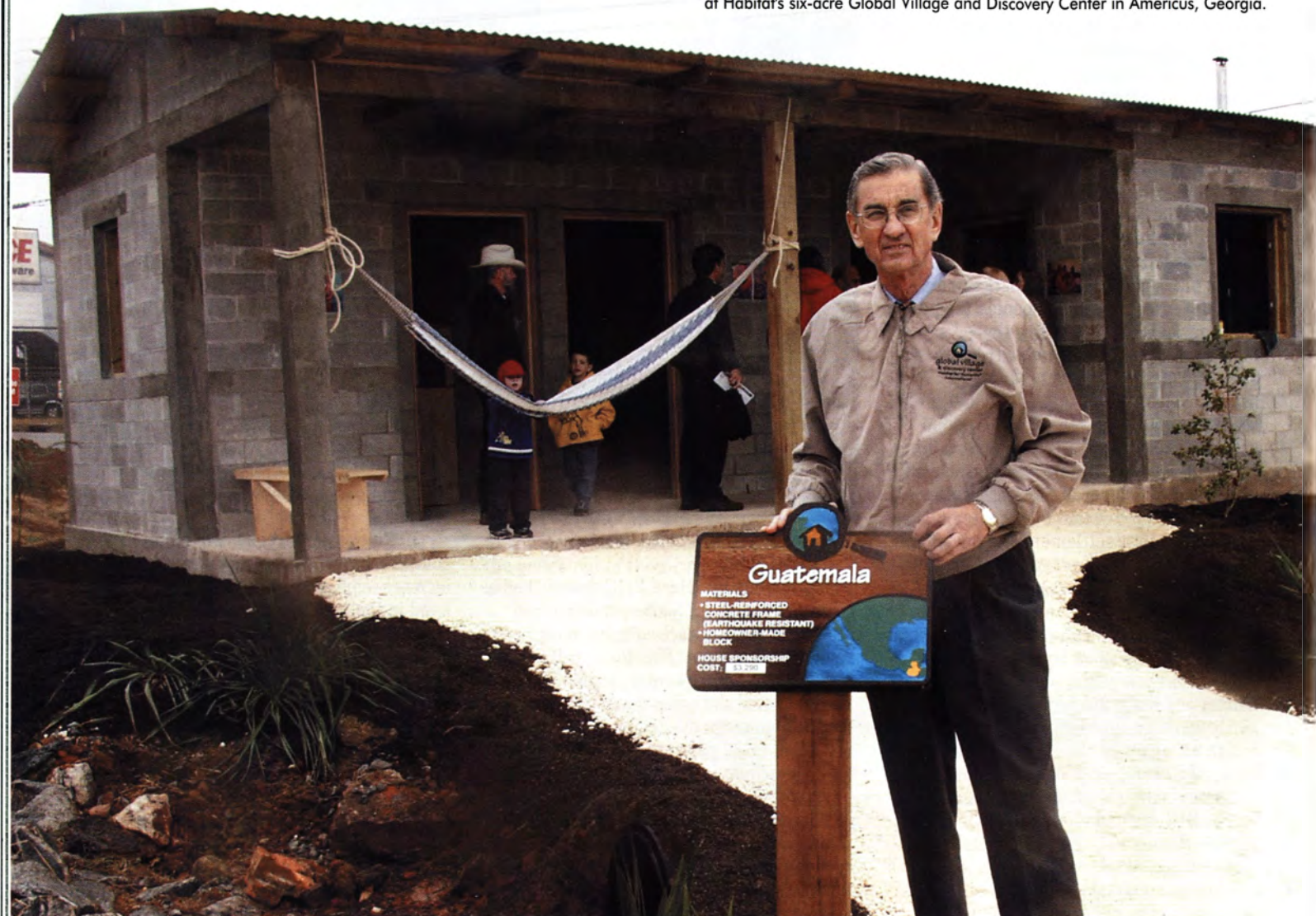
There is a racial subtext to this, as to other NIMBY protests. 'People in the counties want to keep the city people out of their schools and shopping malls,' explains Carol Jackson tersely, using what another Richmonder later describes as 'Richmond "code" for race'. The counties have resisted the building of both public and affordable housing within their boundaries. When I ask Somanath whether BHC has had any failures, he cites a development in Henrico County which was blocked by local residents.

Of Winchester Greens' 240 family units, some 90 are rented by people with very low incomes—most of them people who already lived in the neighbourhood and decided to stay on. Most of the other residents are teachers, nurses, police officers, with an average income of \$35,000. Ten per cent earn over \$60,000. People from all three groups take leadership through the Civic Association—and BHC prides itself on the fact that you cannot tell a resident's income by looking at their home.

A visit to the development's showhouse, with its two bathrooms and beautifully fitted kitchen, makes this clear. There's nothing shabby about BHC's idea of affordable housing. 'Give people the best: that's my belief,' says Somanath, simply.

When the building work began at Winchester Greens, many of the original inhabitants could not believe that they would really be allowed to live in the new houses. When they discovered that they could move in, many, says Somanath, 'just cried'. ■

Habitat for Humanity founder Millard Fuller stands in front of a Guatemalan house at Habitat's six-acre Global Village and Discovery Center in Americus, Georgia.



## Still hammering for humanity

*Kenneth Noble* looks at a charity which is rehousing poor people worldwide, and discovers that it has launched a most unusual 'theme park'.

Readers with long memories may recall a front cover of *For A Change* where former US President Jimmy Carter, surrounded by roof joists, wielded a hammer. He was helping construct a home for Habitat for Humanity (HFH), a charity which works with the poor to provide affordable housing. At that time (1989), we reported that there were 378 Habitat affiliates in the US, five in Canada, one in South Africa, and more than 71 projects in 26 developing countries. A Habitat group in Britain was 'in the early stages of formation'.

Now, 14 years later, HFH has come a

long way. Some 625,000 people around the world live in 150,000 Habitat-built houses. A new house is completed every 26 minutes.

The fact that there are some 2.6 billion people around the world living in slums or informal housing, their lives blighted by poverty and lack of opportunity, shows how urgently such initiatives are needed.

Founded in 1976 by US lawyer Millard Fuller and his wife, Linda, HFH today works with volunteers and communities in 87 countries to build simple, affordable housing.

Wherever they are working, Habitat

helps poor people to build and own their own homes. The homes are decent and appropriate to the country. Habitat's traditional approach has been that all materials for each house are paid for, or donated, in advance. Donors pay money into a 'revolving fund' which is used to pay all the costs. Because the labour is entirely voluntary, prices are kept to a minimum. Each homeowner family is expected to invest their own labour or 'sweat-equity' into the building of their home and, later, the homes of other families. This reduces the cost of labour, increases pride of ownership and fosters community

development. When the homes are complete, families make interest-free mortgage payments back into the revolving fund.

In Great Britain (rather quaintly described on HFH's international web site as 'an island nation in the northwest of the continent of Europe with a long history of successful economic development') HFH's web site proclaims: 'Habitat for Humanity has built homes in Southwark in London, Banbury, Eastbourne, and will shortly be building in Liverpool.' The site is enlivened by the stories of some who have helped build and then lived in HFH houses (see box).

Ian Pearce, HFH's Community Team Manager in the UK, tells me that most of their focus is on raising money for projects overseas. The needs in the UK are real—one of the new Southwark homeowners and their four children previously lived in a two bedroom flat without proper sanitation. But what would be classed as 'unfit for human habitation' here might be considered normal in many developing countries. He points out that it costs Habitat £65,000 to build a house in London while they can house a family in Democratic Republic of Congo for £1,700. This sum would provide seven houses in Sri Lanka, one of several countries where HFH has found that its traditional approach is not appropriate because casual labourers have no experience of managing loans.

In response to this, HFH launched a new scheme called Save and Build. Pearce explains that twelve families work as a community, with each agreeing to save a few rupees each day. After six months they will have saved £138, to which HFH then adds £276—enough to build three houses. The families stick with the scheme until, after two years, they all have basic homes. They then have the option of carrying on until they have added further rooms.

### PURPOSEFUL HOLIDAYS

Pearce speaks enthusiastically about the various projects that Habitat runs from the UK:

- 'Global Village—holidays with a purpose' give British people the chance to have a hands-on experience of helping to build a home in a developing country. Holidaymakers must also donate £300 to Habitat, £250 of which goes to the country they are visiting.
- In 2002 some 25 teams of ten or more people went from Britain to build houses abroad. Many of these trips were run in partnership with other organizations. For instance more than 100 solicitors and other staff from the international law firm Freshfield Bruckhaus Deringer spent three days, staggered over a three week period, in Romania, with the project leadership provided by Habitat. As well as what they achieve for the country visited, such

schemes 'provide team-building opportunities'.

■ Friends of HFH raise money to build houses in a developing country of their choice. The Friends are often people who have taken part in one of the Global Village holidays.

### THEME PARK

In the US, where it all started, President Carter maintains his links with HFH. This summer he opened their latest venture—a theme park of poverty. The Global Village and Discovery Center in Americus, Georgia, covers six acres and cost \$4.5 million. This sum was raised separately from the housing fund, and the land was donated. The village displays poor people's housing around the world and shows examples of the homes that Habitat builds. There are five main elements to the park:

- a visitor welcome centre;
- a marketplace with theatre;
- a 'Living in Poverty' exhibit;
- the Global Village of 15 completed houses;
- the experience area where families can learn how to make house bricks and tiles.

The *Athens Banner-Herald* (8 June) quotes a Habitat spokesperson as saying, 'One middle-aged visitor was so moved during a recent preview tour that he pledged to build a Habitat house every year for the rest of his life.'

The Village 'can bring us down to earth about what we have, compared to the rest of the world,' Linda Mills, the tour coordinator, told the paper. ■

[www.habitatforhumanity.org.uk](http://www.habitatforhumanity.org.uk)

Habitat volunteers get to work on a house in Britain



### TINA FELLOWS' CHOICES



Ten-year-old Micaiah Fellows didn't learn to ride a bike until just last year.

That's because she and her little brother Jared, four, lived in a council estate where their mother, Tina, was too frightened to let them play outside. The children's last memory of the estate is of a group of boys throwing glass bottles at them as they moved out of their flat.

They moved into a Habitat for Humanity house in Southwark, South London, at the end of 2001. 'The quality of life now is 100 times better than it was. The children and I laugh so much now,' says Tina.

'I have more time to spend with them now, and they are both much calmer. Micaiah got an award for behaviour at school after we moved in because of the amazing change in her.'

'There are so many things that I believe for myself now. I have abilities that I have never explored because I had other things to worry about. I might be able to go to university part-time.'

'Building your own HFH house is seriously hard work, but it's all very worth it. It rebuilt my confidence in people to see that there were people who were willing to give without expecting anything in return. It was amazing to see everybody building the house together, from big corporations and donations to single volunteers.'

'Habitat for Humanity is dealing with the big things. They are really changing lives.'



Wilfrida Akumu receives a cow from Direct Link. Her grandson, James, is an Aids orphan sponsored by the charity.

## People to people

When Pam McGibbon booked a holiday of a lifetime in Kenya in 1988, she had little idea that she was embarking on a lifetime of love and commitment.

McGibbon, then 46, was living in Scotland, where she and her husband ran a company organizing exhibitions. Her 17-year-old son was about to leave home to live in London, and they hoped that the holiday would be something they could all look back on.

While touring the country from one luxury hotel to the next, she noticed how much poverty seemed to be tucked away at the side of the road, out of sight of the tourists.

'While the other members of my party were living it up, I

made a point of going out to talk to as many Kenyans as I could, seeking out boatmen, drivers, waiters and anyone else I could find.'

By the end of her visit she had promised her two drivers and a waiter in the hotel that she would try to find people in Britain who would help them to educate their children. To her surprise, she found the sponsors within a few days, and went on to set up Direct Link, a charity which makes links between people in Kenya and Britain.

'People were excited because they were able to write direct to their sponsored families, with no middle man,' she says. 'The families wrote back with all their news. They could also send gifts and visit "their" families when they went on holiday. The idea was similar to larger charities but it

was much more personal.'

Two years later McGibbon returned to Kenya, where she renewed old acquaintances, visited schools and spoke to rural people and politicians. Back in Britain, she filled containers with typewriters, bicycles, hospital equipment, school books and other necessities, holding fund-raising harambees to cover transport costs.

Now, 15 years later, Direct Link has grown into a substantial charity. It has provided education for hundreds of Kenyan children, right through from primary school to university and beyond; it has supported many schools and orphanages; it has built a library, a workshop and a laboratory; and, above all, it has brought people together.

One of Direct Link's latest projects is Cows and Chickens

for the Community, which is based in Kosodo, near Rongo, where the community has been decimated by Aids. Almost the only people left in Kosodo are grandmothers and orphaned children. The middle generation has been virtually wiped out.

The project raises funds to buy cows and chickens for a widows' and grandmothers' cooperative, so that they have milk and eggs for their orphaned grandchildren and can sell the surplus.

All Direct Link's work is carried out by volunteers in Britain and Kenya, who carry all the administration costs. This means that all donations can be sent direct to their target, with no deductions, (apart for bank charges).

'When I started with my three families, and thought how tiny my contribution was, a wonderful man came up to me and said, "One plus one plus one can make a big difference,"' says McGibbon. 'Nobody can change the whole world but if everyone does a tiny bit, then a big difference can be made overall.'

*Pam McGibbon can be contacted on 07761 976102 or at [fountainservices@ukonline.co.uk](mailto:fountainservices@ukonline.co.uk) and would be happy to help other people set up their own small sponsorship-style charities.*

## SEED for Big Apple

The thought of tackling poverty in New York City is enough to overwhelm most people. Even identifying where to begin is daunting. This has not deterred Melinda Lackey and Carlos Monteagudo from charting a vision to create widespread economic well-being in this incredibly diverse, powerful and poverty-stricken city.

Lackey is a former professional ballet dancer turned grassroots activist, while Monteagudo is a practising psychiatrist who



Melinda Lackey and Carlos Monteagudo: sowing seeds

grew up in poverty. They were brought together by a Kellogg Fellowship that funded their personal leadership development. They went on to launch Solutions for Economic Empowerment and Dignity (SEED), a multi-sector approach that addresses such impediments to rising out of poverty as access to childcare, health care, employment and education.

'For me, SEED is rooted in a deep faith commitment,' explains Melinda Lackey. 'My first 28 years were mainly devoted to becoming the best ballet dancer I could be. The disciplined, repetitive practice trained me to appreciate beauty in the art of many bodies moving as one, in tempo. It honed my calling to serve a bigger picture than the reflection of myself in the ballet mirror.'

Lackey moved to New York City at the age of 17. 'I was astounded by the way people rushed to work, and hustled to get places without looking at one another, and without noticeable regard for the suffering so evident on every block. Would I also learn to overlook poverty?'

This question eventually led her to stop dancing and pursue how she might participate in a corps de ballet that creates equitable systems and institutions. She explains: 'I have an unshakable belief in the inherent capacity of every individual to become a leader and co-create solutions.' She is the co-founder of two previous

organizations, Iris House—a multi-service support centre in Harlem created by and for women affected by HIV/Aids—and, more recently, Welfare Rights Initiative—a grassroots leadership training and student advocacy organization. 'SEED builds on these learning opportunities and extends my commitment,' she concludes.

SEED officially opened its doors in October 2002 as an incubator project of the Fund for the City of New York. Its strategy is to engage influential people in partnership with those who know poverty firsthand. SEED brings grassroots activist organizations together with leaders from business, government, media, academic, religious and other sectors. It cultivates shared understanding, vision and strategic organizing across professional, political and cultural divides.

SEED has begun work with the New York Women's Foundation, a public charity with a membership of 9,000 donors which gives grants to 35 organizations. SEED is helping the foundation to engage its diverse constituency in advocacy on behalf of low-income New Yorkers.

'SEED envisions a New York region in which all human beings have the opportunity to realize their full potential,' says Melinda Lackey.

*Steven Greisdorf*  
More information from [www.seed-ny.org](http://www.seed-ny.org) or by contacting Melinda Lackey at [mklackey@seed-ny.org](mailto:mklackey@seed-ny.org)

## Art for people's sake

Every summer Edinburgh becomes a mecca for artists from all over the world thanks to the Fringe and International arts festivals. But what can art do for a local community with more mundane issues to tackle?

Pilton and Muirhouse, overlooking the Forth Bridge from the picturesque seashore of north Edinburgh, are known for their social problems. The area's unemployment and drug scene was the setting for *Trainspotting*, the cult book by Irvine Welsh, which later became a film.

In autumn 2002, the North Edinburgh Arts Centre (NEAC) took on the challenging task of helping the community through the arts. The centre, which is now the biggest community-based arts centre in Scotland,



Mobile from the 'Oyster Wars' project made of seashore flotsam

emerged out of two successful local arts projects—the Muirhouse Festival Association and the Pilton Triangle.

'Our main purpose is to create a strong sense of community and get involved in local life,' says Ian Cooke, one of NEAC's founders and its chair. 'We also want to break the stereotype that community art is amateur and of poor quality.' The current exhibition, *Air—Art in Regeneration*, helps to disprove this misconception.

*Air* features screenprints, graphics, photos and poetry produced by local artists in the last decade, as the result of an innovative project set up by Andy Arnott in 1989. Arnott, an established artist who grew up

in a working class family on the other side of the Forth, had a vision of art as an expression of the voice of the community. His project was one of the foundation stones for NEAC.

The centre's busy schedule of creative activities and events attracts parents and children, as well as their teachers, young mothers and anyone who is interested in contributing to the local art scene. For some it provides not only fun but career development and a road to employment.

The centre's biggest and most challenging project so far was the creation of *Oyster Wars*, which tells the story of the dredging of the Forth oyster beds in the 17th Century, when oysters, until then the staple diet of the fishermen, were becoming a delicacy for the upper classes.

A hundred local people were involved, over a year, in working with a professional writer, a director, musicians, historians and artists. Their efforts resulted in a week-long festival, which included a large-scale theatre production, an exhibition and creative workshops. Everything found its use: children collected flotsam from the sea coast which was turned into the mobiles which now decorate the centre's café.

The NEAC also offers a venue for private events. Its well-equipped theatre and sound recording studios are often used by professionals, especially during the Edinburgh Festivals. This summer, for instance, the centre hosted the Fringe Academy workshops.

The centre's work has been crucial to social inclusion and regeneration in the area. It contributes to the local community's self-esteem by making people believe in themselves through the power of art and creativity.

*Anastasia Stepanova*

Suresh and Mala Vazirani receive the National Quality Award for India's leading biomedical company in 2000



# No bribes for healthy business

Corruption is bad for business, says Suresh Vazirani, Managing Director of an award-winning hi-tech company. He talks to Michael Smith.

**Y**ou are in hospital with a life-threatening illness. Malaria, say, or TB or hepatitis or, God forbid, HIV/Aids. The doctors need to diagnose exactly what you've got. And they need to know fast. They take a sample of your blood and run it through a state-of-the-art blood biochemistry analyser. Such machines can do up to 600 tests in an hour, in batches of 30 blood tests. They save lives.

In India, the market leader in manufacturing high-tech blood diagnostic machines is Transasia Biomedicals, based in Mumbai. The brainchild of Suresh Vazirani, the company's foundations were laid in 1985. Today it is a global player with exports to over 30 countries.

Three years ago Vazirani received the National Exports Award for advanced technology from Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who also presented Vazirani's wife, Mala, with the National Quality Award for the leading biomedical company.

What especially marks out the Vaziranis and their company is their courageous and dogged stance against corruption. Avoiding corruption takes up more of his time than any other issue, he says, and his company employs two lawyers full-time to fight the cases that arise. When, for instance, he wanted to install a fountain in the lunch area, two government officials demanded a \$100 bribe for a licence. Yet no such licences had been issued for 20 years. It took his lawyers four years in the courts, costing \$4,000, to deal with the case.

Vazirani's interest in life-saving technology must have been his *karma*, says his wife Mala. For in his heart he had really wanted to be a doctor. But his parents sent him, one of seven children, on a scholarship to study electrical engineering at Nagpur University.

His parents had fled from Pakistan at the time of Partition in 1947, bringing nothing with them. As a young man, Vazirani had blamed the politicians for his family's deprivation and for corruption. Therefore, he says, he regarded it as his right to travel without paying for a ticket and to steal library books. But then he encountered Moral Re-Armament (now Initiatives of Change) and this challenged him 'to walk the talk, to rise above blame towards responsibility'.

On graduation, he decided to be an unpaid volunteer with MRA. For nine years he helped to run industrial leadership training programmes at Asia Plateau, MRA's conference centre near Pune. There he would urge businessmen not to be corrupt, he recalls. That's all very well, they would reply, but you've never run a business. You don't know what it's like.

The challenge rankled with Vazirani, but he knew it had some truth. So when after nine years with MRA he needed to earn an income, he decided to go into business

himself. In 1979 he and a friend, Satish Sutaria, registered the company name of Transasia, 'as a reminder of Asia Plateau', Vazirani says. He was 29 and had just 250 rupees (about £4) to his name from his final honorarium from MRA.

## GAMBLE

Their idea was to create an importing and marketing company. They had no capital to start a factory, and not even enough to rent an office. But thanks to their experience with MRA, says Mala, 'they wanted to do something of central relevance, definitely in industry, health care or social services. They wanted to make a difference where it really could count.'

Sutaria's mother sold some jewellery to help them get started, and a dental manufacturing businessman, Surendra Patel, and his wife, Tara, let them use their dining room in the Mumbai suburb of Andheri as an office. From there they wrote 100 letters to companies all over the world, offering their marketing services, with hardly any response.

Then Tara's brother sold an apartment and offered to loan them the money. Sutaria felt uneasy about whether they could ever repay the loan. But Vazirani leapt at the opportunity and, taking the biggest gamble of his life, bought a six-month round-the-world air ticket. He wanted to find out what the world was making that India most needed. This was too much for Sutaria, who decided to quit the partnership.

Vazirani visited medical manufacturing companies in Florence and Rome—it was unprecedented for an Indian marketer to turn up on the doorstep. In Tokyo he met a dynamic young export manager, Shimoyama, also handling medical machines, who had visited India after his graduation. They immediately established a rapport and Shimoyama felt he could trust Vazirani to give good customer service. These encounters gave Vazirani his big break and he returned to Mumbai a fully signed up distributor of Italian and Japanese medical diagnostic machines.

Initially he knew little about the machine parts or their application but he set about getting training on his own, clearing the imported machines through customs, installing them and training the

Vazirani: 'We said, "Wow, we can do it!"'



Blair Cummock

customers.

But it was a big leap from importing to manufacturing. The potential market was vast, not only in India but also in China and Africa. The imported machines were expensive and prone to failure. The service engineers that Vazirani employed gave him the confidence that they could assemble them locally themselves.

A critical moment came in 1991 when Vazirani was badly let down by one of the Italian firms. He had the orders from customers, but the machines never arrived. Exasperated, he flew to Rome and visited the company every day for 15 days before concluding that they were never going to deliver. 'That experience in Rome really crystallized things for me—that if we were to come up to customers' expectations, and

**'Corruption is a big roadblock to progress. Because of it everything goes wrong.'**

if I was to control my own destiny, we had to start manufacturing ourselves. It was a question of our credibility.'

Back in Andheri his staff of 25 were so enthusiastic that they put together their first prototype within two months. 'We said to each other, "Wow, we can do it. Why didn't we do it all along?"' That first model had 70 per cent of imported parts. From then on they developed a new model each year and now the foreign content is less than 25 per cent. 'We were able to give tough competition to the bigger American, German and Japanese companies,' Vazirani says.

## BASIS OF TRUST

The company faced tougher competition when, between 1995 and 1997, the government cut import tariffs from 40 per cent to five per cent, under World Trade Organization rules. 'We had to see globalization as an opportunity rather than a threat,' Vazirani says. He calculated that, while the company manufactured 5,000 machines a year for the domestic market, they could produce 20,000 for the world market—provided they could make a machine with a really big capacity.

In 1996, he revisited Japan at a time when the yen was rising, making the large Japanese machines prohibitively expensive abroad. Over three days he negotiated an agreement with a Japanese company that would give him the technology to manufacture the machines in India, in return for a royalty for each one that Transasia sold. 'It was a win-win situation,' Vazirani says. 'Here was a Japanese company willing to give us the technology with not much down payment purely on the

basis of trust.' This first venture into the top end of the market was a dream fulfilled for Vazirani. When a supercilious German distributor visited Transasia, 'You should have seen his face,' Vazirani says. 'His mouth was open. He couldn't believe his eyes. We started supplying to him and it was a very good contract.'

Along with the exports came the fight against corruption. Vazirani risked losing a DM20 million sales contract to Germany because a customs officer wanted a bribe to release vital imported components. Rather than paying up, Vazirani left the components in the warehouse for three months. He went to the top customs officials, arguing that if Transasia didn't get this order the country would lose. 'We appealed to their sense of national pride.' The components were released just in time for Transasia to win the contract.

## IDEAL MATCH

Recently, a politician suggested to Vazirani that it would be 'an opportunity' if they each pocketed part of the World Bank aid the politician had received to improve health care. 'Yes, but is it an opportunity if we land up in one of these ill-equipped hospitals needing urgent care ourselves?' replied Vazirani. At this, the politician changed his tune, realizing that Vazirani was not to be bought. He even promised to increase state aid to hospitals.

Last September, Vazirani was a keynote speaker at the launch in Mumbai of Transparency International's new Business Principles for Combating Bribery. 'Corruption is a big road block to progress,' he says. 'Because of it everything goes wrong. The intimidation leads to wrong decision-making. Transasia can be an example. But many more companies need to be.'

In his stance, Vazirani is wholeheartedly supported by his effervescent wife, Mala. They were introduced by a common friend and 'we took off'—an ideal match—'much to everyone's surprise, including ourselves,' Mala says. They now have three children. It was her idea to supply 35 machines at a special low price to small clinics for the benefit of slum dwellers.

Today Transasia employs 450 people in three locations, one near the airport, and two 150 kilometres up the coast in the state of Gujarat.

'It has been a wonderful learning, and at times tough, experience,' comments Vazirani. 'But I know it is part of God's plan. So I never get worried about the problems. God gives the power and I am sure he gives the solutions too. Whenever I come to a junction, I find someone taking my hand and making sure I take the right turn.' ■

[www.transasia.co.in](http://www.transasia.co.in)



Left: Fifties Man, strong, muscular and a good breadwinner. Right: Millennium Man, sensitive, emotionally available and non-controlling



Corbis (left & right)

# The crisis of maleness

Men today behave as if they're dispensable, maintains Tim Muirhead—but they're not.



**D**on't get me wrong. I like being a bloke. But it does come with certain drawbacks. We die younger; we get sick more; we are much more likely to be the victims and perpetrators of violence; more likely to commit suicide; more likely to lose touch, painfully, with our kids. Why? Well—lots of reasons, but let me just explore a few that are intertwined with our history and culture.

My grandfather, and my father, became men through war. My grandfather would have been judged clinically insane had he run from machine guns. My father had to go ever onward as he saw dear friends

blown, literally, to pieces. They both learned, as a matter of survival, that inner turmoil must be suppressed and denied. It worked in war. But not in peace. The great challenge then, that I and millions like me faced, was: 'Who will teach me to be a man in peacetime?'

My father was a beautiful man, and taught me much, but my early journey through the inner world was made largely without him. After the emotional absence of my father during my adolescence, how well placed am I to relate to and mentor my sons? Many young men are deeply lost, and I can't help but wonder if the traumatic gash in our culture caused by two such all-

consuming wars (and other smaller ones along the way) has left us with an inter-generational crisis of maleness.

## CULTURAL CHANGE

I often ask students to do a 'stereotype' list of the perfect man in the 1950s. Then they do a list for the perfect man today. The lists might look something like this:

1950s	2000s
Good breadwinner	Sharing the housework
Strong	Sensitive
Muscular	Emotionally available
Authority figure	Non-controlling
Disciplinarian	Loving with children

Any people whose culture goes through radical change experience severe stress. Within a generation, men have gone from having to be the macho male to the sensitive, emotionally open home-lover. It actually worked well for me because I was a bit of a granny's blouse even back in the Sixties, but it's a hell of a cultural change for us. One of the most important psychological questions we humans need to answer is, 'Who am I?' When the world keeps changing its mind on who you should be, the answer can become confused and your mental health can get shaky.

## DO MEN MATTER?

When the Titanic went down with too few lifeboats, the cry went up, 'Women and children off first!' Of course it did—it is the cry of our whole culture. When wars are fought, we send men—young men—to fight and die (though this is beginning to change). Men have been deemed, for millennia, more dispensable. Of course, there are good survival-of-the-species reasons for this. But men have internalized this sense of dispensability in devastating ways. We Australian blokes die five to seven years younger than women, and this is almost entirely due to the fact that we don't care for ourselves. We behave as if we don't matter. We take terrible risks, we smoke and drink more, we don't protect ourselves from the sun, we eat badly, we work too hard and get too stressed and ignore the nagging depression and anxiety that most of us live with. Then, when we can ignore it no longer, too many of us kill ourselves—four to five times more than women. And although we're sicker, we go to the doctor or other health professionals a lot less than women.

We are making choices that say, in a thousand ways, 'I don't matter'. If there is one thing to instill in our sons, it is that they are sacred, profoundly important beings, and it is their duty to care for themselves as well as others. (Because, of course, if I don't care for and love myself, I am more likely to lash out at and hurt

others, or become so emotionally locked away that my loved ones—including children—can't know me.)

## LANGUAGES OF INNER SPACE

Women explore the world of emotions largely through words. Could it be that large numbers of men need different languages?

A Vietnam War veteran once came to me when I was working in a government funding agency. He told me that his mates spoke of spiking the tyres of Vietnamese neighbours, that it was clear they needed ways to release the traumas and hatred they had endured during and since the war, and that counselling was not the way for them. He wanted a small amount of money for a club to hold paintball war games. We didn't give it to him—we were worried it was fostering violence.

We were wrong, of course. They were trying to find a language to exorcize their demons. And we told them they were using the wrong language.

In the beautiful film *My Left Foot*, the 'emotionally unavailable' father builds a new room for his son, brick by brick. The mother interprets this act to her son: 'That's the closest he'll ever come to telling you he loves you.' And what a language it is—this language of action. The three words 'I love you', sacred as they are, can pale into insignificance next to an act like that.

The father and son that work on the car in the back shed; the mates who fish together, enjoying meaningless patter and long silences; the friends who go surfing and watch out for each other when a big set comes through; the footballers who stick by their team-mates through thick and thin—these are no less examples of love and emotion and 'innerness' than a conversation about how we are feeling. These are the poetry of action rather than words, and we men should learn to love and celebrate them. Me, I love spoken words. But we don't all love spoken words. Others love doing, and giving, and being together. We must let these languages, too, speak of our love and our inner worlds.

## A PLACE AT HOME

There is great reward in being more part of the family. Dirty nappies and messy dishes and wrinkled clothes are a pain, but are a part of a package that can bring real richness. I remember sitting up all night with my two-year-old son when he had a dangerously high fever. It was awful. And I have never loved more.

But there's lots standing in the way of us taking our place in the world of hearth and home—the world we began to leave during the industrial revolution. Partly, of course, we remain in the comfort zone of patriarchal (and sometimes lazy) role definitions. But there are also cultural

disincentives in place. We are ridiculed for our cooking, shooed out of the kitchen at dinner time, and impatiently lectured when we put the linen back 'in the wrong place', and we often play along. Most of us are not really being asked—or asking—to 'share the domestic duties'. We're being asked to help. We are the assistant domestic help. It feels demeaning and belittling, and we find ourselves feeling powerless and frustrated. This should be no surprise. Anyone feels the same when their skills are ridiculed or ignored (by themselves or others) in any workplace, and the home is no different.

If you think this is not inherent in our culture, just watch the role that men play in advertisements about household goods and foods. The jokes—at least in Australia—consistently focus on domestically hopeless men.

## BRINGING HOME THE BACON

Powerful cultural forces are at play within and around us, telling us that we should be full-time breadwinners. Almost every woman I know has, at some point, chosen to move to part-time (paid) work, to spend more hours in the home. I am not suggesting that this 'home-based' time is not work—it can be the most important, sacred and sometimes exhausting work we do. But men aren't making that choice—women are. We all incur costs for this. One is the separation of men from their families, and the messy, rich love that family immerses us in. If their paid jobs are alienating ones, as so many are, this can lead to terrible meaninglessness for many men.

I sometimes wonder if men wouldn't rather—literally—be dead than a 'failure' at work. A few years ago a lawyer in Perth told me that he could name five lawyers in Perth—all men—who had killed themselves in the previous 12 months. He put that down to the stressful working environment that had been created as the law went from being a profession to a business. What madness is at play here? Why could these men not choose to opt out of their work, rather than their lives?

As I said, I like being a bloke. For all these concerns, we are not victims. Quite the opposite. Many of the actions that are making us sick, sad or dead are self-imposed. We have the freedom to choose. But to choose well we need to be conscious of the historical and cultural forces that play within and around us. Then we can better navigate our way through the wondrous and mysterious journey of being human and, with all its confusion, being a bloke. ■

*Tim Muirhead is Director of the 'CSD (Community, Spirit, and Development) Network' in Perth, Western Australia. His paid and voluntary work have involved him significantly in men's issues.*





Corbis

# Women on top of the world

Yana Bey encounters heartbreak and triumph as a team of Indian women conquer Argan Kangri, an unclimbed peak in the Karakoram Range.

It is mid-morning on 17 July 2003 and I am perched on a rock in Camp I (5,190 metres), facing the icefall of the Phunangma glacier in Ladakh, India. The mountains towering into the azure sky above our heads are part of the eastern Karakoram Range.

We are a group of nine women mountaineers, accompanied by four Sherpa guides and a kitchen staff of three—all men. We are attempting to climb the untrodden peak of Argan Kangri (6,789 metres).

The peak has been attempted only once before: in 2001, by a team of ace men mountaineers—led by the

legendary British climber, Sir Chris Bonington, and the well-known Indian explorer and climber, Harish Kapadia. Even for seasoned mountaineers like them it was a treacherous climb. The mountain drove them back with thigh-deep, soft snow on its flanks.

Nevertheless, we've been in high spirits—with an instinctive feeling that the elements are on our side. Our tents are filled with clothes, down jackets, sleeping bags, woollen gloves and socks, snow boots, and oodles of sunblock, moisturiser, lip balm, cleanser—as well as the routine climbing paraphernalia of ropes, crampons, harnesses,

descenders and carabiners. The kitchen tent—from which a mouth-watering aroma of lentils, vegetables, chutney and soup waft out at mealtimes—makes this inhospitable, boulder-strewn campsite a home away from home.

Within an hour, the exuberance and goodwill that sustained the team through a trying three-day trek from the roadhead of Tirit shatters like glass.

From my rock, I watch Bimla Devi Neoskar, from Maharashtra, walk to the stream at the foot of the camp. She is sobbing while washing her face. Another team member, N Ayingbi Devi from

Manipur, appears more in control of herself as she enters the tent and crawls into her sleeping bag. It's apparent that both need space right now. They have spent the past hour crying uncontrollably after they were told they would not be part of the summit team which is to leave the next day for the higher camp and tackle the unknown upper reaches of the mountain en route to its top.

I sympathize with them but also with the leader, Rita Gombu Marwah, who is from Delhi. She has the unenviable task of taking decisions that will ensure success without jeopardizing safety. The four toughest members—Rita

herself, Phul Maya Tamang, Sushma Thakur and Kavita Barthoki—make a dream team. They walk at the same pace. All are full-time or part-time mountaineering instructors and this gives them an edge in fitness and acclimatization.

The strength of a team is the strength of its weakest member and there is no berth for laggards. Neoskar and Devi cry out, 'We walk just a few feet behind them.' Neoskar is returning to climbing after a decade. She was part of the women's team that went to Everest in 1993. She didn't make it to the final team. Marriage and two sons followed. She and her husband now run an adventure club in Nagpur.

Neoskar speaks of her Everest expedition, 'There too, I missed going to the summit. For five or six years I cried every day. I am known in Nagpur; I am honoured at Women's Day functions and I am invited to speak on Everest. My husband says I should feel fulfilled with all this. But I wanted so much to make it to the summit this time.'

Devi explains why the stakes were so high for her. 'My mountaineering club president said that if I don't climb the peak on this expedition, my name will not be forwarded for future expeditions.'

This is the little-known side of mountaineering: the heart-

burning that is part of 99 per cent of expeditions. Very rarely do all members of a team get to the summit. Chronicles of successful expeditions focus on the glory of the summiteers, not the pain of those who did not get selected for the final climb.

Three days later, our four teammates become the first climbers to stand atop Argan Kangri. 'Aha, once again we've proved that women are better than men,' they crow as they trudge back into Camp I. The Sherpas concede that the girls are tougher than the men mountaineers they have been with.

That evening, a near-full moon appears as the sunset tinges the surrounding peaks with pink, then orange, then cerise and finally pink again. Everyone chips into the hunt for dried dung deposited all around by grazing yaks. The dung makes an excellent fuel for a bonfire. As the flames start rising, illuminating the girls' shining hair and eyes, the Sherpas begin to sing a catchy Nepali folk song. The four victors break into an impromptu dance. A fifth figure joins in as they circle the fire. It is Neoskar, raising her hands to clap, shutting her eyes and swaying to the lilting tune. She has conquered her demons. ■

This article was provided by the Women's Feature Service in Delhi, India.

The nine-woman team which climbed Argan Kangri



Women's Feature Service

## An infectious spirit of self-help

Gajanan Sawant tells Bhanu Kale how deciding not to accept poverty led to the transformation of his community.

Life was tough, even for someone like me who was used to poverty,' says Gajanan Sawant as he looks back to his early married life in Mumbai. 'There was no drinkable water, no road, no school, no doctor and no electricity. We had to walk half an hour to reach the nearest shop.'

It was 1965 and the newly married Sawant, then 19, had left his village of Morgoan in the Pune District of the Indian State of Maharashtra to find work. He succeeded in getting a job as a loom operator in the Khatau Textile Mills in Borivali. He rented a room of a tenement block in Devipada, an isolated *basti* (settlement) on the outskirts of Mumbai.

Sawant's life consisted of hard work in the mill and the struggle to survive and bring up a family in these desperate circumstances. Then something totally unexpected happened. He was chosen to be part of a group of workers and managers from Khatau Mills who attended a five-day industrial seminar at Asia Plateau, a conference centre in the hill station of Panchgani, run by Initiatives of Change.

**'I was made to feel I was somebody, not just a worker.'**

It was a huge culture shock. 'It was like being transported into another world,' he says. 'In Devipada seven of us—my wife, our two children, my mother, my younger brother and my nephew—lived in a room 12 by 10 feet. It served as our kitchen, dining room, bedroom and living room. At Asia Plateau I had an entire room to myself. It was the first time I had ever slept alone in a room.'

He reels off a whole list of firsts—'eating at a neatly laid-out dining table with knife and fork; a bed with a soft foam mattress; bed sheets; running hot and cold water in the shower; "western-style" toilet; meeting foreigners and attending anything like a seminar!' His only wish was that his family could be with him to experience it, too. 'I was made to feel I was somebody, not just a worker. People there cared for me. If a conversation was in English someone would immediately translate for me. People would ask for my views and listen seriously, as if what I said was very important. The manager and the worker sat at the same table. It was all totally different from the world I was living in.'

Sawant says he had got so used to poverty that he had accepted it as natural—something that would never change. There was no bitterness. But when he 'saw that there could be an alternative way to live', this led him to decide first to put some things right in his personal life and then to do something about his situation. 'That was the most important step I took at Asia Plateau. I said to myself, "I am going to come up in life. I shall not continue to live in the ditch of poverty."'

The first thing he did on returning to Devipada was to plant some vegetables along a narrow strip outside his tenement door. He had noticed at the Asia Plateau centre how sewer water had been recycled to irrigate the gardens. A few feet of plastic piping brought waste-water from the corner of his room that served as a kitchen. Household waste was used

as manure. 'It didn't cost me a thing,' he says, 'but it gave me new confidence in myself. I began to see how I could start coming up in life.'

A single well was the only source of water for Devipada's 2,000-plus residents. 'We used to watch the water level anxiously,' recalls Sawant's wife, Shalinitai. 'The moment we felt it had risen we threw in our tins attached to ropes. Only the alert ones could get their share. The process went on round the clock, with endless waiting.' The well was an open one and a lot of silt used to fall in. Over the years it had become choked with dirt.

### 'I shall not continue to live in the ditch of poverty.'

One evening after work Sawant started moving the silt with a borrowed shovel. His solo effort was at first received with ridicule, but, as he persisted, other residents began to join in. 'Together we cleared all the silt from the well. We also cleared the surrounding area and built a stone wall around it for safety. I still remember how much we enjoyed those evenings working together. We felt so happy to see much more water in the cleaned-up well. No one had thought of doing it before because nobody thought it was his job. We had got so used to our hardships that the thought of finding ways to overcome them just never occurred to us.'

Other initiatives soon followed. The silt removed from the well and the drains was used to fill in potholes in the road. Then the entire ground between the well and the *basti* was levelled to make a playground for the children. Another big step was the construction of a rough road linking the *basti* to the highway, allowing vehicles to come in for the first time.

'The spirit of self-help was becoming infectious,' remembers Sawant. 'Every evening we used to meet after working hours to plan the next project. There was always something to be done.' They decided to provide a school for the *basti*. The nearest one was three kilometres away and meant crossing the dangerous highway. A committee was formed with Sawant as president. The school opened some months later—a one-room temporary structure with mud walls, wooden planks for a ceiling and 25 pupils. When this building collapsed in heavy rain, it was decided to build a more ambitious brick structure.

Sawant's committee began serious fund-raising, scrupulously issuing receipts for every contribution. These soon included gifts in kind—cement, roofing material, even the loan of a teacher! When the school opened it boasted a hall able to accommodate 50 pupils, an office, a veranda and a fenced-in playground. There were four classes in two shifts, catering for 200 pupils. 'It became a symbol of the determination of the inhabitants of the *basti* to improve their lot,' says Sawant. 'It also came to be seen as a model of self-help in our whole area.'

Inspired by such grassroots initiatives, the local council decided to put in a water pipeline, and the day came when each household had running water. The school hall was used more and more by the community in non-school hours. A group of Mumbai medical students started visiting every Sunday morning, transforming the hall into a temporary clinic. A pharmaceutical company provided free medicines. On Sunday afternoons the hall was used to teach practical skills—cooking, sewing, nylon purse making—to the women of the *basti*, eventually opening up other sources of income. Other residents copied Sawant in growing vegetables or making small gardens outside their tenement rooms.

'It was as if a new *basti* had been born,' he reflects. 'It confirmed my faith that if we start something with a good motive, God always helps us.' ■



Young people take part in a pro-European Union march in Warsaw on 10 May 2003.

## Young Poles face EU membership

Poland's decision to join the European Union has been a subject of hot debate in schools and universities, writes **Joanna Margueritte**.



N. Kozłowska

I was born and raised in Poland. But as my father is French, I've often questioned my true allegiance. Which of the two countries should I put first? What if they were at war with each other?

Since December 1997, when Poland became an official candidate for accession to the European Union, my fears have gradually evaporated. When Poland becomes a member of a

great and powerful economic union of developed countries, I thought, I won't have to juggle passports anymore. Polish nationality will have all the rights that my other nationality has had for as long as I can remember. My friends will be able to travel as freely as I can on my French passport and to study in any Western country, like I have always known I could. Thoughts of justice and balance appeased my soul.

In March 1998, when the run-up to last June's referendum began, Polish

government officials started going wild with pro-EU campaigns. At first, the campaigns only touched citizens of big cities, then those with TV sets and then those with newspapers until, some time in 2001, the campaign reached everyone who had a valid postal address.

The last two years have been completely dominated by the EU. Parliament's sole occupation, it seemed, was figuring out how many mandates Polish deputies would have in the reformed European Parliament, and how many seats on the Council would be open to Poles. The chief negotiator, Jan Trzuszczynski, kept appearing on TV in between soap operas and news, to tell us how wonderful the European Union was. Pamphlets, flyers, stickers and yellow star-shaped lollipops were distributed in schools, on the streets, in the subway.

By March 2003 the EU was all we ever talked about. Our parents and teachers came to a point where they didn't want to hear the word spoken out loud.

The amount of allegedly unbiased information being thrown at us, young and old, rich and poor, from every corner and at all angles, was overwhelming. After the referendum was over, it all suddenly floated away.

Over the months Poland's youth gradually became aware that the issue was important to us, because it is we, not our parents, who are going to spend most of our lives in the enlarged EU. Through referenda and debates in our high schools and universities, we demanded that our voice be heard by those who were longer in the tooth—even though our opinions had no legal value.

### SUSPICIONS AND DREAMS

Four main lines of reasoning developed among young people. First, there are those who had been taught to see any new supranational ideology that comes from the West as something suspicious and potentially dangerous. They believe that Poland will lose its identity and independence by

joining the EU. I would say that we are losing more of our identity by watching Brazilian soap operas and buying hamburgers.

Then there are those who call themselves 'Euro-enthusiasts' and can't wait for Poland to gain all the benefits of accession. They aren't worried about the possible drawbacks, because they don't know of their existence. These are dreamers, whose minds have been possessed by prospects of unlimited freedom and some kind of miraculous abundance of wealth. Nobody will explain to them, in a couple of years, when Poland is going through the difficult adjustment period, what went wrong. Why it isn't that easy. Why, after three years, there will still be passport controls and currency exchange rates, and not every member country will want Polish employees in their companies.

The third group, the 'Euro-sceptics', would call the enthusiasts naive. They don't trust anything our government says. Their reaction to all the hype was to figure out what joining the EU would really entail: they knew that if there were advantages, there must be disadvantages. It's sad to see how much more complex and logical their arguments are than those of the Euro-enthusiasts.

The sceptics are afraid that foreign corporations will suppress smaller domestic businesses, resulting in unemployment. They are also worried that Polish agriculture will become industrialized, impersonal and driven by big business. Another of their concerns—and it is hard to argue with—is that Poland simply isn't ready for accession. The country's judicial system, its economy and social policies are still a mess.

Also, sceptics ask, why is the EU suddenly making room

for ten new members all at once, at a time when it is trying to reshape its institutions and cut bureaucracy? They say that the fact that we are ten, and not two or three, will mean that each candidate country will have less influence on the accession process—and that this will disadvantage Poland in particular. The sceptics also point out that some of the regulations the EU imposes on its members are ridiculous. The curve of a banana, the pasteurization of cheese, everything seems to be regulated, measured, limited. The principle of subsidiarity (making decisions at the lowest possible level) would be a good thing, they say, if it actually worked.

### NO ALTERNATIVE

The fourth group—which I tend towards—knows that the government is not being entirely honest with 'the masses'. Still, this doesn't change the fact that Poland has nowhere else to go to. Let's face it: we are nothing like Switzerland. We simply can't afford to be isolated from the EU, which by 2004 will surround us on almost every side. We are in, because there is no other alternative.

As for fears of bureaucracy and limited independence, I believe that these will be solved by the new EU constitution, which will affirm principles of equality, democracy and freedom, and also simplify and specify the roles of EU institutions.

When it came to it, 77.45 per cent of those who voted in the referendum (only 58 per cent of the population) voted for accession. The 'youth referendum' in schools had a higher turn-out, with over 70 per cent of the 887,938 students eligible to vote taking part. Of these, 67.13 per cent voted for accession. ■



Peshia Lam (above right) receives the Governor's medal for services to Nagaland



## Addict's journey of hope

Neichu Angami describes a young man's fight against addiction and his campaign to help HIV/Aids sufferers.

**P**eshia Lam was 32 when he died earlier this year. During his short life he had suffered many hardships, been a drug addict, recovered, contracted Aids and lived life in such a way that many remember him with pride.

His native village, Pathso, lies in Nagaland, north-east India, close to the border with Myanmar (Burma). He belonged to the Khamniungam tribe, which is split by the border. Most of his childhood was spent in Tuensang town, which is considered to have the highest rate of HIV in the region.

It was during his teenage years that Peshia was introduced to drugs. He told me that you could exchange heroin for salt in that part of the world, which lies close to the 'golden triangle', a major source of illicit opium. He reckoned it was curiosity and peer pressure that first drew him to drugs. He soon realized that he was craving to be 'high' at all costs. Anything that stood in the way of the 'high' was unbearable. Family relationships and study were the first casualties. He dropped out of school and left home a number of times, only to return when he had nowhere else to go.

Like all addicts, Peshia ran into trouble

with the law and the security forces many times. 'Lock-ups and jails are regular features of an addict's life,' he often remarked.

According to his father, Peshia and his friends were considered the most notorious gang in Tuensang. They were involved in all kinds of trouble, and deeply feared.

His father heard about Mount Gilead Home, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre run by the Naga Mothers Association (NMA) in Kohima, which advocated the 12-step programme of Alcoholics Anonymous. He took Peshia there for treatment in 1992. Jonathan Zingkhai, the resident counsellor at that time recalls the father's question, 'Is there hope for my son? Can he ever be normal?'

The hope that his father sought emerged as Peshia's life changed drastically. He proved that recovery from addiction is a gift available for those who humbly and desperately seek it.

Through the process Peshia refound his lost faith, although it took him some years to trust again and surrender unconditionally to that one and only Authority.

Peshia's rehabilitation took eight long months. He then went back to his studies,

passed his matriculation and decided to dedicate the rest of his life to the care of addicts.

In 1994 the NMA merged with Kripa Foundation to work jointly in drug and alcohol treatment programmes in their de-addiction centre. They sent Peshia to Mumbai for a year's training in counselling. On his return he took an honours degree in Education. He began legal studies but had to stop because of his declining health.

Knowing the risks of having shared needles with other addicts, Peshia decided to be tested. He learned that he was HIV positive. In 1995 he developed an Aids-related skin disease. He feared that if he went to a skin specialist and revealed his condition he would face rejection and predictions of imminent death. But, in the event, he was accepted and assured that, with proper treatment, he would recover from the episode. This gave him hope for a healthy, positive life with HIV/Aids.

Some years later Peshia became a caregiver and counsellor for HIV/Aids patients at the NMA HIV/Aids hospice in Kohima. With his family's backing, he felt that he must go public about his own status in order to fight the stigma and discrimination suffered by Aids victims.

He became involved with the Indian Network of People Living with HIV/Aids (INP+) and, in 2002, he and some friends who were also HIV positive set up a Naga branch (NNP+). He was elected president.

NNP+ has representatives from all districts of Nagaland and works in partnership with NGOs and the State Aids Control Society. They are involved in networking, advocacy, prevention, care and support as well as the daunting task of fighting the stigma of Aids. The state government recognized his outstanding leadership and awarded him the Governor's medal for services to the state.

At the peak of his activism, Peshia was struck with throat cancer. An elder recalls, 'He had great fear and he struggled, but he did not give in.' Within a few months Peshia's health deteriorated drastically. He became very sick during a meeting in New Delhi and his INP+ colleagues took him to hospitals in New Delhi and, later, Bangalore. But he was eventually sent home because he was too weak for treatment.

Back in Kohima, he rallied in spirit. But, despite the care and attention of friends and colleagues, his life was slipping away. His last spoken wish was to go home, and he died in Tuensang, surrounded by friends and family.

The last words whispered to him on his final night in Kohima were, 'Your story will live, and we will know the fullness of life all the more because of your story....' ■



## Fiji's highschool students learn to care

The South Pacific island nation of Fiji has experienced three coups d'état since 1987. These have highlighted tensions between indigenous Fijians and those of Indian extraction, many of whose forebears were brought to the country as indentured labour by Britain, the former colonial power.

During the last ten years over 20,000 highschool students have taken part in an initiative aimed at bridging Fiji's divisions and building a better country. The programme is conducted by Foundations of a Better Fiji, a joint venture of 'Fiji—I care!' and Initiatives of Change. It challenges students to live up to absolute moral values of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love, and 'to adopt a daily practice of quiet reflection on the initiatives of change they could take'.

The students' response has been so positive that there has been a series of weekend training workshops. In July Ratu Tui Cavuilati, the Permanent Secretary of the Public Service Commission, who is responsible for 26,000 civil servants, spoke about how applying the values of Initiatives of Change 20 years ago had turned his life around. Two weeks later he hosted the students in his village—an experience which they found inspirational.

Other visiting speakers have included former High Court Judge and High Chief Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi; well-known NGO activist Jone Dakuvula; and former extreme Fijian nationalist, Ratu Meli Vesikula.

Over half of the students taking part in the school programmes have expressed their discoveries in a voluntary questionnaire. One wrote, 'Firstly I will have to forgive myself. Secondly I will have to forgive others and seek their forgiveness. And lastly, I will have to be an open-minded person in everything I do.... I made the first step admitting with others that I was in the wrong. I had to humble myself and not think that I was in the right all the time.'

## World unites against corruption

In October the United Nations reached agreement on a groundbreaking Convention Against Corruption. A signing ceremony takes place on 9 December in Mexico, whose President, Vincente Fox, is a leading supporter of Transparency International (TI), the global anti-corruption coalition. The date has been proposed as a new annual International Anti-Corruption Day.

Peter Eigen, TI's founder, describes the 'milestone' convention as 'a major instrument to use to push governments to live up to new international standards of integrity and good governance'.

Eigen, a former World Bank official in Kenya, founded TI 10 years ago. His most satisfying moment of the last 10 years, he says, was to return to Kenya last July and, standing next to President Mwai Kibaki, address 400 people in Nairobi, six months after the elections that ousted President Arap Moi's corrupt regime.

In the run-up to the election a grassroots Clean Election campaign helped in a public revolt against repression and corruption. Now Kenya is cleaning out the Augean stables, including sacking 35 public procurement officials for awarding themselves building contracts, and dismissing the head of a corrupt judiciary. According to an opinion poll commissioned by TI in Kenya, 80 per cent of Kenyans think their government is committed to eradicating corruption.

## SINCE YOU ASK

### Your chance to contribute

Starting with the next issue of *For A Change* we are launching a regular interactive feature. In each issue we will pose a question to which we would like readers to send their brief answers. For the first one we'd like you to send in your views and experiences on:

### What has restored your faith in human nature?

Please send no more than 250 words to the Editors, 24 Greencoat Place, London SW1P 1RD, UK, or email [editors@forachange.co.uk](mailto:editors@forachange.co.uk) to reach us by 1 December.



## FROM REV LOGAN KIRK, LOCKERBIE, SCOTLAND

When I read Kenneth Noble's review (Oct/Nov 2003) of the book *Married, a fine predicament* by Anne Roiphe, I was reminded of something Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in a marriage address for his niece (which had to be sent rather than personally delivered because he was in prison).

Bonhoeffer wrote: 'From now on it is not your love which will sustain your marriage, but your marriage which will sustain your love.'

While writing may I add how much I share Marion Watson's appreciation (in her letter) of the piece by Eva Szabo of Romania in the June/July issue.

## FOR A CHANGE

**'During the war in Lebanon, the Christian militias bombed my car and shelled my region, killing 10 people. I wanted revenge. Then in the early 1990s, when I was teaching at the university, one of my students brought me 'For A Change' which changed all my ways of thinking. From that time, I began to believe in love instead of hatred, forgiveness instead of revenge, in unselfishness instead of self-interest.'**

**Judge Ghassan Rabah, Lebanon, speaking in Caux, Switzerland**

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Karen Elliott Gressdorf

## Pointing the way to peace

To Mubarek Awad, the inside of an Israeli jail cell was nothing new. He'd been in many. What was new in 1988 was that outside that jail an Israeli man had joined him in his hunger strike.

He found it baffling. Awad, who was (and is) by no means thin, says he feared for the health of the 'skinny' Israeli. Though at first angry, he gave up his strike so this stranger could give up his.

Once free, Awad, a Greek Orthodox Christian from Jerusalem, met the Israeli, Edward (Edy) Kaufman. They've been warm friends ever since, working non-violently for peace. For many years Kaufman has been Executive Director of the Harry S Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace in Israel (although he took leave from 1991-96 to head the University of Maryland's Center for Development and Conflict Management). Awad, now an American citizen, is national director of the Washington DC-based National Youth Advocate Program and teaches the theory and practice of non-violence at the American University. At a recent event organized by the Nonviolent Peaceforce in Washington, he described how his friendship with Kaufman began.

The event celebrated the departure of eight women and six men for Sri Lanka, where an uneasy ceasefire exists after many years of civil war between the

Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority. This 'peace force' has undergone intensive training in Thailand and will be led by William Knox, a British national with eight years' experience of peace work in Sri Lanka. Between them, the team members, who come from 11 countries, speak 21 languages. They are to be a model for similar groups Peaceforce will send to other parts of the world. They won't take sides. They won't try to negotiate or advise any side what to do. They will be there to aid and comfort civilians, often war's greatest casualties, and model peace in any way they can. Peaceforce's own model is Mahatma Gandhi.

'The dream of a large-scale international force to enable peaceful solutions to conflict, held by so many people over so many years, is becoming reality,' enthused Mel Duncan, Peaceforce's Executive Director, in their newsletter. Sri Lanka was chosen over the Middle East for the first experiment because peace seemed nearer there. But barring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a team may one day be in the Middle East.

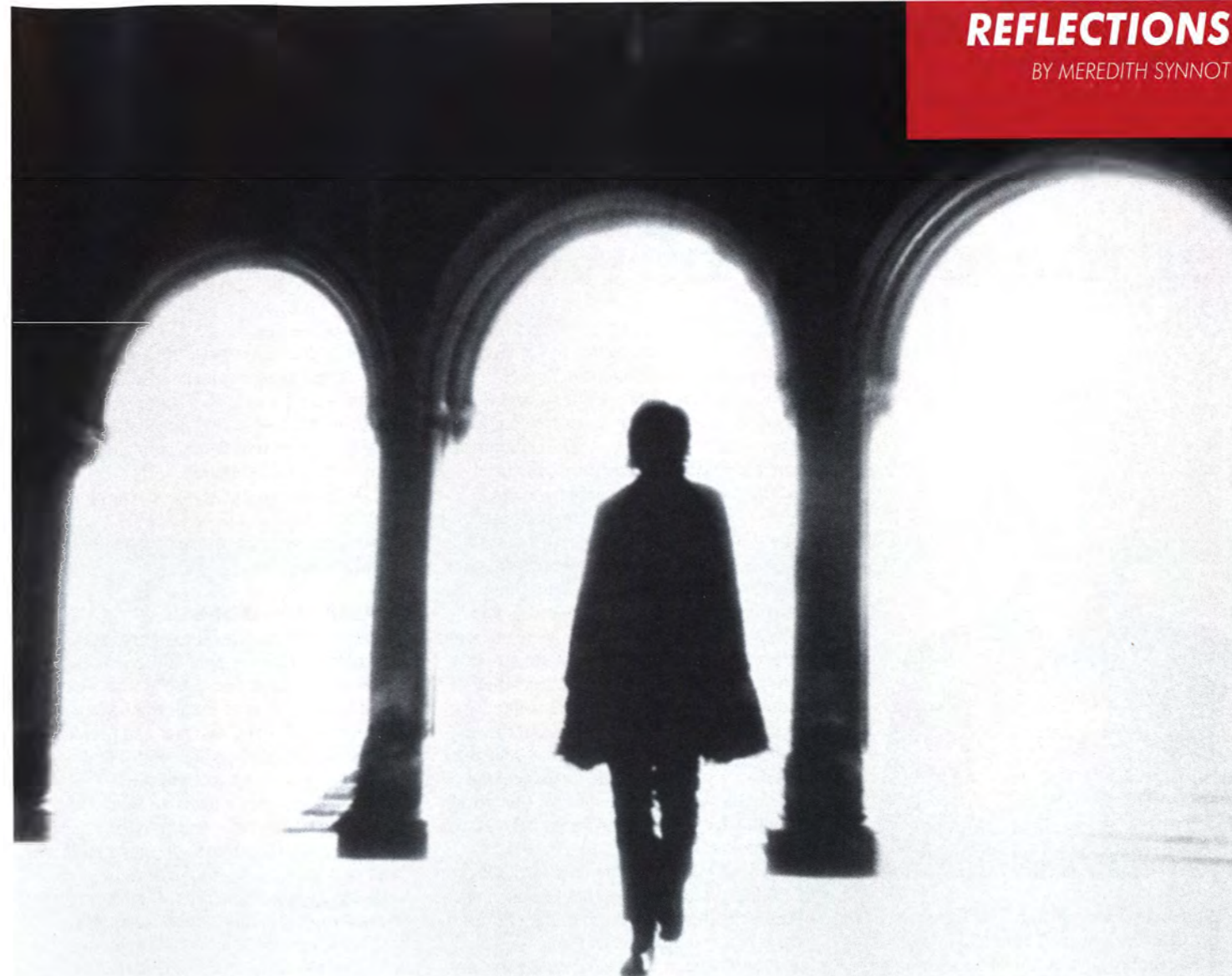
One of the best-kept secrets is the extent to which many strong friendships between Jew and Arab continue despite the area's violence. I'll never forget the young hitch-hiker our press bus picked up in 1980. A corporal in the Israeli Defense

Force, she told me: 'I grew up in Tel Aviv and never knew any Arabs until I joined the army. Now something has happened to me that I thought could never be possible: I've come to love the Arabs.'

Clearly attitudes can change when people get to know each other. They dump stereotypes and regard each other simply as members of the human family. For example, a *Washington Post* photographer recalls how she had a Muslim interpreter accompanying her in Afghanistan. At one point, she put her camera down and went to help several Afghans in need. The astonished interpreter confessed afterwards that he never knew an American could be humane.

Awad says most Palestinians and Israelis want peace. But he feels they need to become a lot more active. Many observers may say peace there is impossible. But if it can happen between individuals on opposite sides, why not between peoples? Awad cites his and Kaufman's example, noting his Israeli friend 'was even a Zionist!' But that Zionist was willing to risk his health, maybe his life, to move peace forward. ■

*This is the last in this series of columns by Robert Webb, a former columnist and editorial writer with the 'Cincinnati Enquirer'. Look out for a new writer in our next issue!*



## Opening up to honesty

The origin of honesty is in the soul. I have an image of a big central place inside where the accountability, the direction-giving, the sorting-out and the discerning in my life takes place. It is only as I've moved into this place that I've been able to notice issues like honesty.

For many years I have been deeply moved by the way the spirit of life, or God, comes to us, longs for us and as the Christian Scripture says, even 'groans' for our transformation. I had experienced the invitation to transformation in many ways. But although I had been aware that I had a tendency to exaggerate details when I was talking, I had never felt deeply challenged by these little moments of what can only be called dishonesty.

The 'quiet time'—time alone with the source of life—has become the central dynamic in my life. One of the most significant questions I have learned to ask myself, and also others, is 'What are you being called to?' It is a wonderful question, which opens us up to such a quality of listening and discerning that it can only be a gift of the Spirit.

For me, the answer to that question was quite simply 'honesty'—honesty in all its forms, honesty in relationships, in attitude and in action. It was a call to become more transparent, to become more frank, to 'say it how it is', to use the right word and to not block up the channels for myself and others by half-submerged issues. It was a call to be vigilant about honesty—honesty before God and with God, honesty about myself and with myself, and honesty about and with others.

Because the call to honesty came to me in the quiet time, I have been able to experience not only the challenge but also the blessing. I experience the spirit of God desiring this for me as an opportunity for freedom and new growth. I've felt the grace and strength to persevere with opening up this new gift. The spirit called me through a process that I trust and that has proved to be a very good way to get hold of me.

This may seem general but it has worked in specific ways as well. Recently another person and I had taken opposing views on a particular issue. We both felt

justified and quite passionate in our views and, because we couldn't find any common ground, chose to agree to differ. However in order both to maintain my stance and to avoid conflict, I began to notice a movement towards secrecy in me.

I began to be uncomfortable about the feeling that secrecy was the only option, so took it to the spirit of God in a quiet time. Again, the call was to honesty—to be honest with the person about feeling secretive. Almost immediately, a third person was introduced to the situation who had an overarching view of both sides of the issue. Because the impasse had been softened by honesty, we were both able to move into a bigger space and experience not only new freedom and a resolution but amazing new opportunities as well.

My experience of honesty leads me again to believe that the spirit of God is on our side. My part of the bargain is willingness to accept the invitation, to recognize the call to ever-deeper levels of integrity and responsibility, and to follow where this leads. ■

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