

Good as Gold

A retired college professor from San Francisco has set out to change lives from Afghanistan to Indonesia – a few dollars at a time

Tibor Krausz Bangkok

NAVIGATING THE WARREN of makeshift squatter shacks in a Bangkok slum built along a railway track, Marc Gold takes a wrong turn and gets hopelessly lost. He winds up at a small mosque in a narrow dead-end alley hung with laundry and redolent of rotting garbage. The American Jew buttonholes a wiry, bare-chested local with a wispy beard and a knitted hat and asks him for directions.

“This happens all the time,” notes Gold, a man who has clocked up enough mileage in his travels over the past two decades to take him around the globe several times over. “In the end I always get there,” he insists.

“There” in this case turns out to be a small lean-to with open sides, squeezed between rickety cubicle-like residences. It opens right onto the rails, where now and then a train rumbles by deafeningly. Today, a Saturday morning, the edifice will function as a classroom for a dozen or so local children who perch on plastic chairs arranged in a semi-circle. They’re here to learn English from foreign volunteers; Gold is here to check up on their progress.

The American is sponsoring the education of several of these children, including Usna, a playful 9-year-old in a headscarf. She lost a leg two years ago when she fell under a passing train. “I want to learn English so I can become a teacher and help children like us learn about the world,” she says with childlike sincerity.

Following the class, Gold bonds with his protégés by donning a rubber dog nose and proceeding to bark, sniff, pant and loll his tongue at them with make-believe canine



CHEAP TRICK: Marc Gold, wearing a rubber dog nose, entertains Thai Muslim children in a Bangkok slum, where he sponsors the education of several of them. ‘It’s a cheap trick, but it always works,’ he explains.

zeal. The kiddos shriek joyfully and pretend to pat him. “It’s a cheap trick, but it always works,” he explains.

At moments like this, Gold, who is 62, short and full of beans, looks nothing like the university professor he once was, teaching psychology and psychotherapy at community colleges in the San Francisco Bay

Area. A divorcé with two adult sons, Gold took early retirement in 2003 and has been on the road ever since. Mexico, Mozambique, Tibet, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, China, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Thailand – he’s visited them all, several of them numerous times.

But he isn’t much interested in the sights.



TIBOR KRAUSZ

Instead, Gold pursues his own brand of travel: philanthropic tourism. “I try to go where most of the poor people are,” he notes.

He slogs muddy dirt tracks to a far-flung Tibetan village to hand out, like a wandering Santa, warm blankets, soccer balls and art supplies to children at a local orphanage. He stops by municipal garbage dumps teeming with destitute child scavengers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, to sign them up for scholarships at a local school. He traipses around Bangkok slums in search of underprivileged

youngsters to get them to drama therapy and English classes.

Dubbed the “shoestring philanthropist,” Gold, who sports rumpled travel wear and lives out of two duffel bags and a wheeled suitcase, never spends more than a few hundred dollars on any one of his myriad projects. “For people who live on a dollar or less a day,” he explains, “even 50 or a hundred dollars can make a huge difference.”

FOR MANY CONVERTS TO THE cause of grassroots philanthropy, there’s a single incident, a touching encounter, a moment of clarity, which sets them on a course to help others. For Gold that epiphany came in 1989.

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– Mark Josephs

During a trip as a tourist to the Himalayan hill station of Darjeeling in India, he met a young Tibetan refugee, who invited him to his home. In the tumbledown little shack, Gold saw the man’s wife constantly touching her ears while grimacing with pain. He realized she was suffering from a potentially deadly ear infection. He found her a doctor and paid for antibiotics, which cost just \$1. A further \$30 got her a hearing aid. The young woman was ecstatic at being able to hear again.

“I’d thought you had to be rich to do such things,” Gold recalls. “I realized I had the power to help change people’s lives. It was like being Superman and not knowing you could fly.”

On returning home, Gold got in touch with

one hundred of his friends and asked them for small donations. Before long, he was back in India with \$2,200. He then set up a non-profit charity and called it 100 Friends. Two decades on, 100 Friends has several thousand members worldwide, many of them Jewish. “You have to give them credit,” Gold quips. “The idea of cheap Jews is an unfair stereotype.”

Last year Gold raised \$200,000 for the dozens of projects and individuals he is sponsoring at any one time across South and Southeast Asia. While he’s on the road, he keeps in touch with his backers and protégés via his portable office: a laptop, a digital camera, and a cell phone.

Unlike international aid agencies that dole out assistance in bulk (often with plenty of waste along the way), Gold zeroes in on the neediest individuals he encounters during his sojourns. He does so by performing both random and preplanned acts of kindness. Through his spider’s web of contacts across the region, Gold homes in on orphanages, rural schools, hospitals, women’s shelters and old-age homes in search of those most in need of help.

“He focuses on the bang for the buck,” says Shon Pistoll, a musician from Philadelphia, who accompanied Gold on his recent six-week trip to India, Gold’s 13th visit to the subcontinent. “A donation goes straight from his hand to the hands of people who need it most.”

YOU COULD POINT RANDOMLY anywhere on a map of Southeast Asia, and chances are Gold has already made a difference in some lives. His mission, he says, is to “enable people to support themselves and regain their dignity.”

The island of Sulawesi in Indonesia: the American Jew gave an elderly Muslim man living off a garbage dump some seed money so he could start a small convenience shop.

Banda Aceh on the island of Sumatra, Indonesia: Gold bought nets and other essentials for fishermen who had lost their livelihoods in the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004 so they could set sail again for new catch.

Nepal: Gold is sponsoring 150 young girls, at the price of a goat each, to keep them from being hired out into bonded slavery by their parents or lured into prostitution by

unscrupulous traffickers.

Kabul, Afghanistan: Gold bought sewing machines for battered women at a shelter; purchased pots and jars for a poor widow with three children so she could make and sell chutney for a living; and bought a cart for a badly scarred woman so she could launch a small business selling vegetables.

“Marc is like a one-man battalion of *tikkun olam* [repairing the world],” says Judi Leff, director of Special Projects at the Reform Jewish Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco, who has organized several fundraisers for Gold’s projects. “He sees solutions as fast as he sees problems. His approach is one of cooperation and empowerment, not of Western paternalism.”

Gold’s approach also blends earthly pragmatism with clownish mischief. Within the space of a few minutes he can go from expounding on the views of the American Jewish “existentialist psychotherapist” Irvin D. Yalon to accosting random passersby playfully with a mechanical singing carp that wiggles its tail and belts out Bobby McFerrin’s song “Don’t Worry Be Happy.” “I’m sure to many people [in remote rural areas] I must look like someone from outer space,” he concedes.

Others see him as a savior. “Marc has saved me and my family,” says Lhamo, a young Tibetan woman who first met Gold by chance a few years ago near her hometown in China’s vast hinterland. “If not for him, I would have spent my whole life [in poverty] on a farm.” Instead, thanks to Gold, Lhamo has completed a two-year college program in China and next September she will continue her studies on a scholarship in California. Her younger brother, too, is back in school. “Marc encourages me to study hard. He’s been like a father to me,” Lhamo adds.

Everywhere Gold goes, he makes a point of helping the sick by paying for the treatment of those who can’t afford it. In Vietnam he’s footed the bill for a lifesaving heart surgery for a girl and leukemia treatment for another. In Burma he’s restored sight to an elderly man with severe cataracts by paying for his treatment. In Bali he’s financed restorative surgeries for children with cleft palates.

A few years ago in Ladakh in northern India, Gold stumbled (almost literally) upon a 94-year-old Tibetan woman shivering, hungry and frostbitten, in a dark basement. He put her up with a local family for \$300 a year, which helped her spend the last two years of her life in comfort. “Come on, that could be your grandma!” Gold says.

“Marc is able to do very big things with very little money,” notes Mark Josephs, a songwriter-guitarist who is a childhood friend of Gold and a longtime supporter of his work. “There’s no 100 Friends office building and Marc doesn’t own a home or rent an apartment. He’s constantly traveling. If I didn’t know him, I may be reluctant to contribute to [a charity like his], but Marc is genuinely sincere in what he does. The word *mensch* comes to mind.”

But Gold rejects the label of saintly do-gooder. “I don’t pat myself on the back for doing this. I love traveling and I love helping people – it’s a chicken-and-egg thing. I do it because it’s interesting and fun,” he says.

And he clearly enjoys basking in the role of savior. Many of his prized photographs feature him beaming beside needy souls he’s helped. “Marc loves to hog the limelight,” notes a British woman, who runs her own charity program in Thailand. “At times he can seem like a bit of a show-off.”

GROWING UP IN ATLANTIC City’s Jewish community in New Jersey, Gold learned the importance of *tzedaka* [charity] at his father’s knee. Albert Gold, a photographer, donated proceeds from his pictures to charity and often took young Marc to Jewish old-age homes to spend time with lonelier residents. “Every few months my father would bring home a homeless man,” Gold recalls. “He would give the man a bath, a nice dinner, a new set of clothes and a few dollars. He really taught me empathy and the value of doing *mitzvot*.”

Albert Gold also instilled in his son another one of his passions: an abiding interest in foreign lands and cultures. From age six Marc began perusing his father’s vast collection of National Geographic magazines and began dreaming of traveling to distant countries. Soon after his father died and when the younger Gold was 14, he hit the road, traveling all around the US. He dropped out of school and became a hippie. “I had a choice between LSD and algebra,” he notes. He chose the former.

In those heady days of the flower-power revolution, Gold wore a shirt fashioned from an American flag and let his hair grow in curly ringlets. (“All gone now,” he laments.) He joined a commune, learned to play the sitar, and dabbled in various forms of eastern mysticism seeking to attain “Buddha nature,” the feeling of being as one with the world. “I followed a very Jewish path,” he offers, “in the sense that I was searching for some deep meaning to life.”

Failing to reach enlightenment, he returned to school. He went on to graduate with a master’s in psychology from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1979. Two years previously Gold was voted “Teacher of the Year” at a part black, part Puerto Rican public school in New York’s Harlem, where he had been working as a teacher. He received the award from Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., the slain civil rights activist’s father.

On the side, Gold also produced a radio program on “world music” for WBAI in New York and became a rare foreign follower of the teachings of the Turkish Sufi order of Whirling Dervishes, spending weeks in Istanbul with the sect’s inner circle. In the mid-1980s, restless for new challenges, he began studying behavioral medicine and became the head of the first AIDS counseling and testing program in San Francisco’s gay community, an epicenter of the HIV epidemic. “Twenty percent of my staff died within a year,” he remembers. “I got burned out in the end – so much death.”

And the sense of having found a higher purpose was still eluding him. Then came that moment of revelation in Darjeeling.

Instead of trying to find meaning in esoteric religious teachings, New Age fads, scientific books, and psychotherapy as he had been doing for years, Gold finally found his calling in helping people in some of the world’s poorest countries. “Saving a woman’s life for the price of a candy bar has kept me focused and occupied for the past 22 years,” Gold says.

As a bonus, he is now unencumbered by the daily grind of earning a living or paying off a mortgage; instead, he can enjoy the spontaneity and excitement of open-ended travel. “I’m free and I don’t need much,” Gold says. Sometimes night finds him bedding down on the floor of a Tibetan mud house or somewhere on a charpoy in India.

In some ways his itinerant micro-charity work has allowed Gold to turn back into the footloose hippie he once was. He isn’t averse to lighting up on an opium pipe or on a joint if offered one during his travels, and doesn’t shy away from Age of Aquarius wisdom by uttering sentences like “I had the image of the healing circle traveling around the world.”

For Gold, who professes to be an atheist, helping the poor has become a quasi-spiritual experience. “It’s the look on people’s faces after you help them – that look of gratitude,” he says. “You can be jaded and cynical about a lot of things, but that look is pure.”

He then exclaims: “It’s a [expletive] great experience, are you kidding!” ●