

Golden years

-Tuesday, August 8, 2006

SPECIAL TO THE HERALD NEWS



Frank Brady covered a wall of his office with a map of the world before he knew all the places in the world he would touch.

Since 1999, Brady has grown the outreach operation he and his wife Peg founded, Medical Missions for Children, into a high-caliber charity with international reach. Among its varied efforts, the organization uses technology to link American and European medical experts with patients and doctors in other countries.

Last month, Brady, 63, was named one of 15 finalists for the first Purpose Prize, a nationwide competition that seeks to recognize social innovators over the age of 60. At a summit at Stanford University in early September, Brady will learn whether he was selected as one of five winners the award, started this year by the San Francisco-based think tank Civic Ventures.

As a finalist, Brady received \$10,000. As a winner, he would take home \$100,000 and have the chance to receive additional funding in the future.

"I've always believed that there is so much talent and good that can be done by people that, for all practical purposes, are retired," Brady said in an interview last week at the charity's headquarters, located within St. Joseph's Children's Hospital in Paterson.

"We never in our wildest dreams imagined we'd be working with the volume of kids that we have been. We knew that we wanted to help a lot of kids." He sat at his desk, which faces the world map wallpaper he bought from an airline magazine in 2002.

He said he got the map because he was hearing from people who lived all over the world, and, though he is well-traveled, he did not know where some of their homes were.

The story of how Brady came to found Medical Missions for Children starts in his own childhood. At the age of 1, he said, he was diagnosed with spinal meningitis and given a terminal prognosis. His mother took a chance on a new drug -- penicillin -- which proved miraculous.

As he grew up in Clifton, Brady heard his mother's ideas about why he was saved, he said. "In her mind," he said, "I was spared for a specific purpose."

He did not know what that purpose was until heart problems forced him to retire in his 50s from a fast-paced, international business career with General Electric. To Brady, retirement in the traditional sense seemed an unattractive option. He did not want to feel bored and unfulfilled, his schedule a glut of golf engagements.

So, he decided to use his life experiences -- and some of the contacts he made as a businessman -- to help other families

get past medical crises like the one his family had faced.

He recalled having breakfast at a restaurant with his wife one day and seeing what he refers to as "the starfish story" on the back of a menu. In the story, an old man plucking starfish from the sand and tossing them back into the sea is approached by a person who tells him he can't possibly make a difference, that there are too many starfish. The old man picks up one more starfish, returns it to the water, and replies, "It sure made a difference to that one!" The story inspired the Bradys, who thought, "We have to figure out how to get as many of those starfish off the beach as possible," Frank Brady said.

In the end, the couple's solution was to create an infrastructure for disseminating medical information. According to UNICEF, nearly 11 million children in the developing world die each year before the age of 5 mostly from preventable causes. Part of the problem lies in misdiagnoses, which occur 31 percent of the time, Brady said. His charity has proved that linking a local doctor and patient with an expert overseas through telemedicine, and providing doctors with additional learning materials, works.

"There's a tremendous disparity in medical knowledge between doctors from different parts of the U.S. and doctors from different parts of the world," Brady said.

Jim Emerman, the executive vice president of Civic Ventures and director of the Purpose Prize, said Brady's story stood out from among 12,000 nominations that were received.

The concept of retirement is changing, Emerman said -- for many people, retirement is now about being engaged in the most significant way they ever have been. Brady, who was inspired by events in his own life, is a role model for the nation's baby boomers as they decide what they can contribute to the world, Emerman said.

"He's clearly somebody who demonstrates that creativity hasn't stopped," Emerman said. "If anything, it's accelerating."

Twenty-eight tier-one mentoring hospitals in the U.S. and Europe provide their expertise to hospitals in countries around the world through Medical Missions for Children. Multiple hospitals in 36 countries have access to this expertise. More than 25,000 catastrophically ill children have been helped since 1999 through remote consultations with medical specialists.

But the charity does still more. Its Global Video Library of Medicine is a repository of information, with thousands of hours of programming stored to video. Giggles Children's Theater, a twice-a-week program at St. Joseph's Children's Hospital, entertains local children and hospital patients. Its television channel, the Medical Broadcasting Channel, delivers educational content via satellite and a research-based version of the Internet, Internet2. The channel alone is expected eventually to reach over a million children a year, Brady said.

Through a relationship with the World Bank and its Global Development and Learning Network, the charity already has a direct presence in more than 100 countries.

And, remarkably, it continues to grow.

At a recent production of Giggles Children's Theater at St. Joseph's, Frank and Peg Brady sat in the audience with a roomful of children jumping, clapping and wiggling in their seats to the music and antics of an entertainer called Mr. Brian. The program's purpose, Frank Brady said, is to help kids get over the cabin fever they can feel during a hospital stay.

"If you can give the child a little relief, something to look forward to ... it's a good thing," he said.

For children abroad, the relief Medical Missions for Children gives can mean an accurate medical diagnosis and effective treatment -- and sometimes even a longer, better life.

Brady said he and his wife are still in touch with the first child their charity helped, Yordano Alvarez of Panama, who had six surgeries at St. Joseph's to correct problems caused by a cranial deformity. The process saved Yordano's life, Brady said.

He and Peg continue to travel to see firsthand the types of issues children and their doctors confront abroad.

Being so involved -- people often mistakenly call him "Dr. Brady," he said -- has led to a fulfilling retirement. Using life experiences to lead is "really a wonderful goal for someone who's finished their working life and is looking for something important to do," Brady said.

If you want to feel great, help others, he said. "And if you really want to feel great, help kids."

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