

'T is the season to give, and few people embody the spirit of altruism better than Marc Gold. For 22 years, he has trekked through Asia handing out money to the needy in small amounts, as little as 50 cents and rarely exceeding \$500. But even though the dollar figures are small, the impact is big. In Vietnam, a modest donation was enough for a widow to buy a sewing machine and start a business. In Aceh, Indonesia, a fisherman fixed his boat and returned to self-sufficiency.

Compared with global aid organizations and their billion-dollar budgets, Gold's operation is tiny, but by his own estimate, he has touched over 50,000 lives. An energetic cross between Santa Claus and Johnny Appleseed, Gold, 61, spends four months a year raising funds in friends' living rooms and the rest on the road finding more individuals to help.

In 1989, while touring India, Gold met Thinlay, a Tibetan refugee, who invited him to his home. Thinlay's wife, Tsering, welcomed him but kept holding her ears—she was suffering from a painful, deadly infection. Gold found her a physician and bought the antibiotic she needed. It cost just \$1—and saved Tsering's life. Then Gold spent \$35 on a hearing aid so she could return to work and her son could go to school. "When I pressed the switch to turn on the hearing aid, her burst of joy burned into my brain," Gold recalls. "I was thunderstruck, realizing I could restore her hearing for a relative pittance. I thought you had to be wealthy to do such things."

Returning to the U.S. with a new sense of purpose, Gold wrote to 100 friends, hoping to raise \$200 to give away on his next trip.

The Shoestring Philanthropist

One man is transforming people's lives, \$5 at a time

by Linda Arking



Marc Gold rejoices with students at a Tibetan orphanage school in 2008 after telling them they'd be receiving 10 donated soccer balls.

He raised \$2000. Today, his donors—through his nonprofit, 100 Friends—exceed 4000. But outside of keeping them informed with a newsletter, he sends no mass mailings and has no paid employees. His mantra is simple: "You give it to me, and I give it to them."

Five years ago, Gold pared down his belongings to a few duffel bags and boxes. Formerly a teacher in San Francisco, he works out of a Bangkok hotel room and lives off retirement savings and a modest pension. He keeps his expenses—which may include hiring a transla-

tor or a van to deliver, for instance, the tools to help a young man open a bike-repair shop—low.

When he meets someone, Gold sits down to chat and maybe shares a cup of tea. Mostly, he listens. He has a knack for spotting people

With Gold's small donation, a widow was able to buy a sewing machine and start a business

who aren't on the radar of the large aid groups. One day in Kolkata, India, a rickshaw ferrying Gold broke down, and the driver wept. An interpreter explained that the vehicle was the man's livelihood and home. Gold paid a mechanic \$40 to repair the rickshaw and requested that the driver use it once a month to transport others in need. In Gyantse, Tibet, he saw a girl struggling with a large cart, which held her paralyzed mother. Thanks to him, the mother has a wheelchair and the daughter goes to school.

"Someone once asked me if I was playing God," Gold says. "The people I help don't ask questions like that. They only know a stranger is willing to help them."

While Gold has helped pay for the building of some schools and libraries, the bulk of his giving is small. Rather than expand, he encourages others to become shoestring philanthropists, sharing his experiences and contacts and often giving them their first \$100. Arlene Butler, a social worker and minister from Cape Charles, Va., heard about his work in 2006. "I'd saved \$300, so I called Marc and asked if he'd help me give it away," she recalls. Instead, he gave her advice, so she sent out e-mails seeking donations, netting \$3000. That year, she went to Thailand and gave the money to sick children. "Now our kids are involved in our philanthropic travel. In Panama, we helped fund the education program of a tribe in the jungle," Butler says. "It changes you inside when you have a chance to do these things."

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Meet three Americans who've been inspired into action by Gold at Parade.com /shoestring.