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FROM A CHARMED TO A CHARITABLE LIFE: TWO YOUNG MEN MAKING DREAMS COME TRUE FOR CHILDREN

The first thing that strikes you about Marc Jenni and Daniel Siegfried is how comfortable they are with themselves. Both barefoot, in shorts and T-shirts and in need of a shave when we met in their Chiang Mai home-cum-office, they greeted me with broad smiles, warm handshakes and the sense that, despite busy schedules, they were genuinely glad I'd come to learn more about the charity they launched two years ago.

I'd learned about *Child's Dream*, a non-profit organization incorporated in Switzerland and operating in the Mekong Sub-Region from their enthusiastic office manager, Heidi Schmid. She is one of a group of volunteers located in various parts of the world who are committed to helping the new and growing social change organization that Daniel and Marc conceived and head.

Both Daniel and Marc, now 27 and 35 respectively, were successful bankers in Asia when they realized that something was missing from their lives. Working for Switzerland's largest bank, UBS, in Zurich, Hong Kong, Singapore and Seoul, they each became restless and increasingly uncomfortable with the affluent lives they were living. So whenever they had vacation, they backpacked in other Asian countries where they began to realize what life was like for poor rural villagers in places like Burma and northern Thailand. They explain what began to happen: "We had everything we needed in material terms. And to escape the pressure of our high-ranking jobs, or to compensate for our frustrations, we flew to other Asian capitals for the weekend, often business-class, spending huge amounts of money just to get the latest gadgets or eat good food. But life was not as good as it sounds and soon it became weird. Our problem seemed increasingly abstract and we needed new kicks while at the same time their value was fading. The divide between our private and business life got very difficult."

Daniel was the first to quit his job. He went to Thailand "to learn and get experience." But he soon realized that the organization where he was volunteering was riddled with corruption. "I experienced a steep learning curve there," he says now. "A huge part of the Child's Dream concept is based on what I saw happening there."

Marc had been working longer and felt he needed a break. He wanted to spend time in Europe or to study in Asia. When he gave notice at the bank they handed him six months severance and told him to leave immediately. So he went to visit Daniel in Chiang Mai, where he learned that his friend wanted to start his own charitable organization. They discussed their mutual vision for a non-governmental organization (NGO) that would make a real difference, and Child's Dream was launched. "It's been two years now," says Marc, "and I am convinced that it was the right decision. I could not imagine going back to the world of finance." Adds Daniel, "What I am doing now feels right and I hope we will make a big difference to the lives of the children we are trying to help."

That difference is already evident. Incorporated in October 2003, Child's Dream is involved in more than two dozen projects in the Mekong Sub-Region (MSR) of Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. The focus of Child's Dream's work to date is there because of the "super-crisis" in the Golden Triangle region, which has been described as "a poisonous underground marketplace." It is here that Burma and Laos, two of the world's least developed countries, meet the booming economies of China and Thailand, providing fertile ground for

trafficking in drugs, humans, and just about anything else that money can buy. The humanitarian crisis in the region is staggering. An estimated 70,000 children are forcibly conscripted into the army in Burma where they suffer abuse as porters, human shields, mine sweepers and sex slaves. Almost 80 percent of illegal migrants into Thailand from Laos are child workers. Somewhere between 60,000 to 200,000 children in Thailand are abused through child prostitution. And Thailand has more than a million illegal Burmese migrant workers in addition to the 140,000 Burmese refugees living in nine refugee camps in the country.

All of this translates into a horror story for the region's children. With their parents either dead, in prison for drug trafficking or in prostitution, they don't know where to go. They are extremely vulnerable to exploitation. Most of them are from minority groups and have no belongings, no nationality and no rights. Drug lords push them into addiction so that they can force them to smuggle goods over the border, and begging gangs lure them with promises of a better future.

While there are several other projects helping these children, Marc and Daniel see these charitable funds as too often unevenly spread or inefficient. Often, for example, they provide goods such as medicine in such over-supply that they rot in warehouses while there is no infrastructure such as hospitals with beds and clean water. If there are schools at all they are lean-tos without books and writing paper. To ensure optimal use of funds, Child's Dream provides schools, shelters, water and electrical systems and personal items to cover hygiene and educational needs directly to the projects they support. They purchase all material and goods at local shops and they directly supervise the construction and implementation at project sites.

Their approach pays off. For example, in Mae Hong Son, Thailand one completed project provided shelter for about 40 children, most of them orphans (and most of them girls) who fled across the border from Burma because they'd lost their parents. Along with pleasant and sturdy housing, they built a school with a fully equipped kitchen for vocational training and a water system with a filter and generator. For an investment of less than US\$ 23,000 Child's Dream, in partnership with the Embassy of Switzerland in Bangkok, has helped prevent child exploitation and trafficking by providing education and shelter to vulnerable children.

In another project in Burma, children whose parents are drug addicts who use their kids to beg or who sell them into prostitution, the school Child's Dream built helped prevent migration and exploitation by offering education and a safe haven. The entire project cost less than \$5,000. Another big school was built close to Mae Sai, right on the Thai/Burmese border in a 'de facto refugee camp', providing education to more than 350 children. In Mae Sot, a new project will offer day care and educational services to more than 285 children of Burmese migrant workers, while nearby 96 Muslim children will benefit from new sanitation facilities and an extension to their school. In Ban Kwai and Ban Mae Surin Refugee Camps where about 22,000 Burmese refugees live, 2700 children between three and five years of age will receive a set of warm clothes each for the cold season, and nursery school uniforms. And throughout the region, students of migrant schools will be able to make full use of the education provided by having writing pads, pens and books supplied.

Child's Dream is clearly achieving its mission, providing support to projects that care unconditionally for orphans and children living in poverty in the Mekong Sub-Region. Integrity obviously underscores their allocation of funds and the full financial transparency they encourage ensures independence and diversity in the work undertaken. Overheads at Child's Dream are less than 10 percent. Neither Marc nor Daniel draws salary and they don't plan to; they will derive income when their saving run out by establishing a charity consulting and advisory group, largely designed to foster dialogue between corporations and other donors and NGOs. (To date Child's Dream has only one paid employee.) Dedicated to containing growth so that the approach they've developed is not compromised, the organization's founders envision something resembling franchises in the future. But for now, Daniel Siegfried and Marc Jenni are content to apply their business and banking skills to helping at-risk children along Thailand's borders.

“Giving up a carefully knitted ‘safety net’ wasn’t an easy task,” they say. “But it turned out to be a highly rewarding one. It’s amazing to realize how much one gets back by giving first!”

To find out more about Child’s Dream, or to contribute, visit www.childsdream.org, or contact them on info@childsdream.org

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