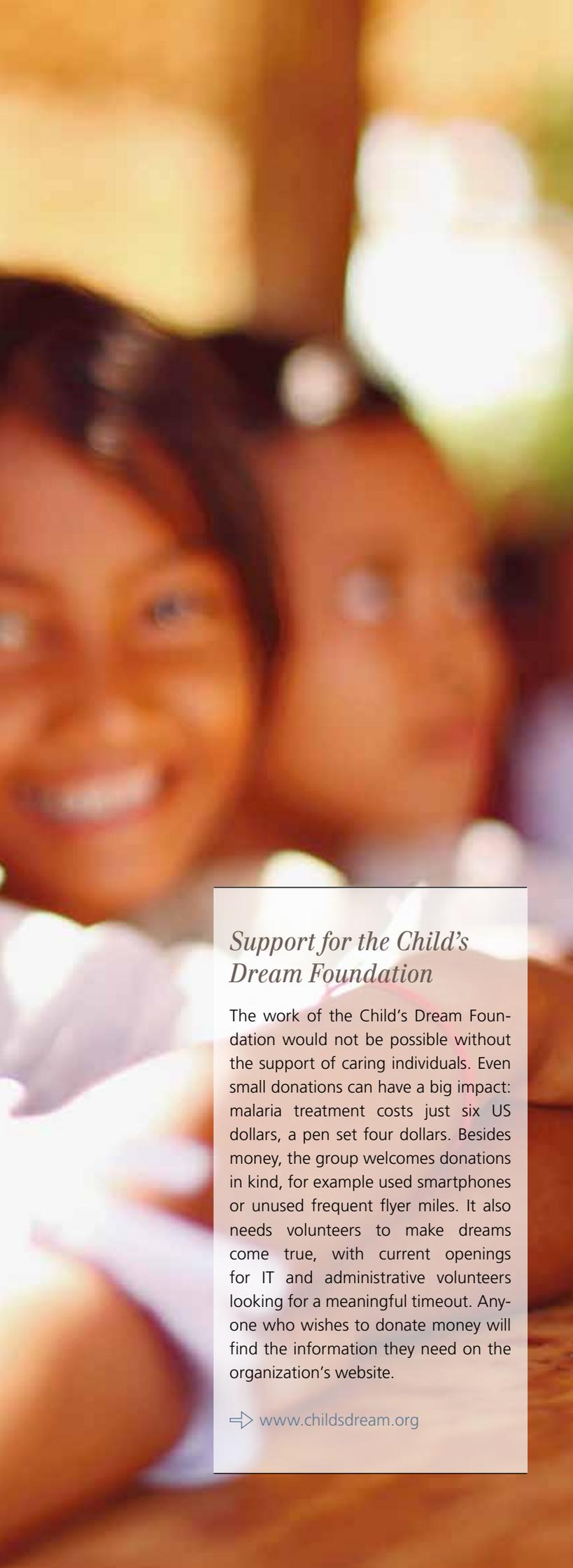


# *Helping children in need in the Mekong region*

Two former UBS employees, Marc Jenni and Daniel Siegfried, have founded a charitable organization for children in Thailand. Donations received so far have enabled them to build 120 schools.

Text \_ Alex Haemmerli Image \_ Child's Dream Foundation



### *Support for the Child's Dream Foundation*

The work of the Child's Dream Foundation would not be possible without the support of caring individuals. Even small donations can have a big impact: malaria treatment costs just six US dollars, a pen set four dollars. Besides money, the group welcomes donations in kind, for example used smartphones or unused frequent flyer miles. It also needs volunteers to make dreams come true, with current openings for IT and administrative volunteers looking for a meaningful timeout. Anyone who wishes to donate money will find the information they need on the organization's website.

⇒ [www.childsdream.org](http://www.childsdream.org)

"It's cold here," Marc Jenni laments over the phone. For Swiss sensibilities, his sense of what qualifies as cold is a little off, because in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, at the headquarters of the non-profit charitable organization Child's Dream, it is 25 degrees celsius. "After 15 years in the region, your skin gets used to the high temperatures," says Jenni, a native of Grisons. It takes a lot to make him break a sweat these days.



▶ Daniel Siegfried (left) and Marc Jenni.

In his previous life, Jenni, now 42, was a top banker, having joined Swiss Bank Corporation (SBV) in 1985. Later, he moved to the Swiss Banking Association (SBG). After SBV and SBG merged to become UBS, he wound up in Hong Kong and Singapore. The Swiss banker was earning big money, residing in five-star hotels and flying business class only. But something was missing in his life: "It was a very lonely job," he recalls.

Then, in 2003, the critical moment came. Jenni was looking for a change of pace; he toyed with the idea of going back to school to do a degree in Asian studies. But things were to unfold differently. A UBS colleague eight years his junior, Daniel Siegfried, approached him with the idea of starting up a children's aid organization together, dedicated to empowering disadvantaged children in Laos, Cambodia, Burma and Thailand. Jenni's initial reaction was to laugh it off: "I asked Dani if he was okay in the head!" The effort seemed too enormous, the likelihood of actually making a difference too small.

Ultimately, however, Jenni was convinced it could work. At first it was the organizational and legal aspects that he found compelling. "It was like starting up a company," he says. A huge amount of work was required to get Child's Dream off the ground: "The first few years, we worked 14-hour days," says Jenni. The two co-founders paid themselves no salary for years to keep administrative costs low. "After nearly 19 years in private banking, I really didn't have to work another day in my life," Jenni adds thoughtfully. Today the men pay themselves 1,000 francs a month to cover part of their living costs. Some of the 27 permanent staff members – most are from the region – earn more than their Swiss bosses.

The hard work was worth it: in 2011 alone, funds donated to Child's Dream totaled 3.89 million Swiss francs. About a third of that money came from Switzerland, with 3.42 million francs channeled into projects that directly benefit the people in need. At around seven percent, the aid agency's administrative costs are very low. "Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that Child's Dream could become so big," says Jenni. Most of the money goes toward providing education to the Mekong re-



◀ Child's Dream aims to offer every child a place in school.

gion's disadvantaged children: since its establishment in 2003, Child's Dream has built some 120 elementary schools in addition to dozens of playgrounds and water systems. The children the charity helps are provided with a complete education, from nursery school all the way to secondary school. Jenni estimates that his organization has so far been able to help around 30,000 children. "Our goal is to enable every child to attend school." Particularly in Laos and Cambodia, however, children continue to be viewed as a source of labor. "Convincing parents to send their children to school often demands great powers of persuasion," reports the former banker.

The second major focus is higher education, which Child's Dream addresses with vocational training based on the Swiss model and by funding the running costs of high schools that prepare young people for university. Since 2003, Child's Dream has enabled 3,000 young people from poor families to attend high school or to receive training as mechanics, cooks, translators and nurses. The group has also provided university scholarships to more than 150 Burmese and Laotian youths. At a cost of 9,000 dollars per student per year, the selection process is understandably rigorous. According to Jenni, support from the group is having a big impact in Burma, where Child's Dream alumni now work in government offices and are instrumental in driving the process of democratization.

"But the health programs are the absolute highlight for me," Jenni says, with excitement in his voice. Nearly one-fifth of donations are earmarked for deworming, immunization and vitamin programs for children, as well as for malaria control and to provide life-saving operations, in particular heart operations. "Last year around 200 operations were performed with support from Child's Dream, without which those children probably would have died," the aid worker reports proudly. With such a big weight to shoulder, Jenni has little time for a private life. "I can't neatly separate my personal life from my job," he says, adding that he doesn't find it necessary anyway. "I found my calling in Child's Dream, and I find the work incredibly satisfying, affirming and gratifying." And yet Jenni, an early riser, somehow manages to find time for a half-hour workout every morning. "I either go jogging or swimming," he says.

Word of the Child's Dream success story has spread, with the team receiving between five and 10 funding proposals from regional organizations each week. Roughly a third of these receive support. The most important criterion is that beneficiaries may not be excluded due to gender, ethnicity or religion. "A child is a child." In keeping with this principle, the group funds those projects that promise to yield "the greatest social benefit relative to the money invested." Despite his commitment to the Mekong region, Jenni has not forgotten his Swiss roots. "I am proud to be Swiss and I go back home twice a year." He also continues to pay into the Swiss social security system via AHV contributions through the Swiss-registered charity. He is certain of one thing, though; "I'll probably never live in Switzerland again." •



▲ Child's Dream funds vocational and skills training based on the Swiss model.