

Aid to China's poor comes from Heart

By Dean Nelson

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Barbi Moore could tell by the tone of voice that her China airlift plan was in trouble. No one looked her in the eye; there was a lot of muttering. She heard things about bad timing and a bad political climate, about the delicate status of U.S.-China relations.

Discouraging. That was the word that kept coming around in her mind.

The Point Loma resident was trying to get the U.S. Embassy in Beijing to support her plan to bring \$6.2 million worth of medicine and medical supplies -- 40 tons -- to needy regions of China.

Her organization, a humanitarian relief agency, had already gotten the medicine donated. Companies like Eli Lilly, Ortho McNeil Pharmaceutical, 3M, McNeil Consumer Products, Hoechst Marion Roussel labs, Wyeth-Ayerst labs and others were all providing materials.

It was high-quality product, too. Nothing nearing an expiration date.

McDonnell Douglas Corp. was providing money and logistical support through Washington, D.C., and Beijing. Federal Express was providing the DC-10 cargo plane and ground transportation in China to distribute the boxes to various hospitals and clinics.

But the project was breaking down in the U.S. Embassy compound in Beijing. Officials in the Economic Division kept questioning Moore's motives. It was fall 1996, and she wanted to schedule the airlift for April 1997.

"I told them that there was no agenda, no ulterior motive, just an act of friendship and goodwill," said Moore. The suspicion was familiar to her.

As director of international programs for Heart To Heart International, an agency with offices in downtown San Diego and Kansas City, Moore's motives have been scrutinized in every foreign region Heart To Heart has gone to -- Armenia, the Newly Independent States (formerly the Soviet Union), Calcutta, Vietnam and elsewhere.

Officials from Tijuana, Oklahoma City, Northridge, Los Angeles and cities in hurricane pathways have been less skeptical when Heart To Heart has provided aid following natural or civil disasters. But the overseas international efforts are assumed by governments to have strings attached.

When she was finally dismissed from the meeting in Beijing, she had serious doubts about whether the April airlift would occur. She was so bothered that she couldn't even remember which of the several hallways or doors in the embassy compound led to the exit. The Americans escorted her out.

But just as she was leaving the building, in came Jack Gosnell from lunch.

"Jack!" Moore said.

"Barbi!" Gosnell said.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Apparently I'm doing an airlift to China for Heart To Heart," he said.

At that point, the man who had just dismissed Moore from his office shook his head and said to her, "I think we're starting this meeting over."

Gosnell is the U.S. minister counselor for economic affairs in China. He was recently transferred to Beijing from St. Petersburg, Russia, where he had procured clearances for Heart To Heart on two previous medical airlifts.

The men who had been meeting with Moore earlier work for Gosnell. Moore didn't know Gosnell was in China. All clearances came rapidly after that.

"I'm comfortable using the word miracle," Moore said of the chance meeting with Gosnell.

The China medical airlift, organized largely by Moore and her San Diego staff, occurred as scheduled last month. Forty volunteers from San Diego and across the U.S. participated to ensure that the donated medicine and supplies reached their stated destination. Each paid \$3,500 for the experience.

The volunteers represented a variety of professions and backgrounds: Maxine Lindell is a retired teacher in Camarillo, Calif. Mark Schlansky is director of the commercial aircraft division for McDonnell Douglas in Washington, D.C. Teri Loetterle is a billing clerk in upstate New York.

Rex Davidson is the executive director of Goodwill Industries of Greater New York. Ree Merrigan sells real estate in Leawood, Kan. Dr. Nancy Ferguson owns emergency medical clinics in Pennsylvania. Erik Engstrom is a pizza chef in Davenport, Iowa.

Many of them heard about the trip through the agency's newsletter. Some heard by word of mouth.

"My sister works for the printing firm that publishes their newsletter, and she read the description of the trip to me over the phone," said Teresa Svedman, who owns Home Oxygen Medical Equipment with her husband, David, in Oswego, N.Y. The Svedmans brought their 15-year-old son, Jordon, on the trip.

Ferguson read about the project in a journal sent to members of the American Academy of Family Practice. The AAFP and Heart To Heart have worked together on several international relief efforts, and Ferguson went with them to Armenia in 1994.

One of the volunteers was Myron Brilliant, director of trade policy in Asian affairs for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Washington, D.C.

Brilliant had heard about Heart To Heart's Vietnam airlift in 1995. While in San Diego in February to speak to the San Diego Chamber of Commerce, he heard about the agency's fund-raising auction at Mission Valley Shopping Center for the China project, and he stopped by to learn more. The auction raised nearly \$30,000 for the airlift.

"I was intrigued by what I had heard about the Vietnam airlift," Brilliant said. "Typically when I go to Asia, I

deal with people in suits and never leave the hotel. This looked like a chance to look at China from a completely different perspective."

And, given the rancor in recent political discussions about China concerning trade, human rights abuses, religious persecution, secret campaign contributions and the coming Hong Kong takeover, a completely different perspective was available by carrying boxes of medicine to hospitals and clinics.

"Naturally, what I experienced personally will translate into what I do professionally and allow me to speak with more conviction," he said.

In the early stages of planning the airlift, Moore said that her dealings with both the U.S. and Chinese governments were full of carefully chosen phrases designed to not inflame an already testy public stance each nation had taken toward the other.

"After several conversations they became convinced that this really was a gesture of friendship," she said. "Then everyone dropped their guards and we got along beautifully."

The airlift fit in well with the Poverty Alleviation Campaign recently begun by China's central government.

China's Sichuan province was most receptive to the Heart To Heart airlift; this is the same area that produced the two giant pandas that are now living in the San Diego Zoo. It is China's largest province -- 110 million people -- and with China's recent economic expansion, it represents one of the nation's greatest disparities between rich and poor.

Chengdu, a cosmopolitan city of nearly 10 million, has a trade history that dates to the Han Dynasty nearly 2,000 years ago, when it was a hub of the silk industry. Now companies like Mobil Oil, Texaco, Shell, Philips, IBM, Nestle, Motorola and Oracle have offices there. A Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza is the second five-star hotel to open in Chengdu in the past few months.

But the population in the rural areas continues to fall farther behind this development. While a good meal in Chengdu can cost around \$20 (U.S. equivalent), the average annual income of a rural Sichuan resident is less than \$70.

Medicine from Heart To Heart went first to the Sichuan Provincial People's Hospital in Chengdu. The volunteers then broke into three groups, two of which distributed medicine to other parts of the province.

The first group, which included doctors and nurses, stayed in Chengdu and discussed various kinds of treatments with the hospital's staff.

While there, Dr. Doug Cusick, a plastic surgeon from Kansas City, performed surgery on a young man born with no ears. He scrubbed up, along with a nurse from the Heart To Heart group, translators and some of the hospital medical staff.

"It got pretty crowded in there," he said.

Another group went to Zigong, a four-hour bus ride from Chengdu, where volunteers visited a city hospital, smaller facilities on the edge of the city, and rural one-room clinics in the mountains. They also led discussions on recent medical developments.

The third group traveled eight hours by bus to Nanchong to do the same. In each location, hundreds of people watched as the trucks pulled up and human chains formed to pass boxes from the vehicles to the hospitals. Sometimes a military band was waiting, most often playing "Auld Lang Syne," and dozens of costumed

children gave each volunteer pictures they had colored, along with bouquets of flowers. In the mountain clinics, the entire village turned out to watch and participate.

During a visit to one of these rural clinics, the lone doctor revealed that he had colon cancer and didn't know how long he had to live. Through a translator, he said that bringing the medicine to his clinic was important but, more importantly, the volunteers had come to visit him.

Maurice Hall, an emergency room nurse from Larned, Kan., couldn't help but respond. Hall, who recently underwent surgery for prostate cancer, went to the doctor and hugged him.

"It wasn't a very Chinese thing to do, given how they don't show much emotion," Hall said. "But I wanted him to know that there is hope." Surprisingly, the doctor clung to Hall for several seconds.

It was Hall's operation and massive heart attack during the surgery that made him want to volunteer for the airlift.

"I got my life back," he said. "I had to ask what I wanted to do with the rest of it."

Volunteer Jerry Ketner, who runs crisis intervention centers for youngsters in Colorado, said he saw similarities between the poor of China and those in the United States.

"Not all of those on the bottom are moochers trying to take advantage of the system," he said. "These people are needy."

Mark Schlansky of McDonnell Douglas, a San Diego State University alum, said that it was important for the volunteers to remember this sense of human warmth and gratitude when they returned to the United States.

"We all saw that we are more similar than dissimilar," he said. "If we go home and remember that, it could be the difference between another Cold War and a new era. China is the country to be reckoned with."

Responses like that motivate Heart To Heart chairman Gary Morsch and Moore to keep planning such airlifts. The first one occurred five years ago when Morsch suggested to his local Rotary Club that they should invest their time on the needs of others.

Heart To Heart was organized shortly after that trip, and Moore was the first employee. Now there are nine full-time employees in the two offices. The rest of the work is done by part-time staff and volunteers.

To date, Heart To Heart has conducted nearly 20 airlifts and provided more than \$100 million in donated medicine and supplies around the world. The group is one of five invited by the U.S. State Department to participate in a major airlift this summer to aid the Newly Independent States.

"I have said all along that these projects were not about pills, but about people," Morsch said. "Everyone on this delegation has a different view of China than they had before. They aren't thinking about communists and capitalists, Chinese or Americans. They're thinking about people."

Still, Morsch is aware that China's government may have orchestrated a public relations campaign during Heart To Heart's stay to provide positive impressions for the Americans.

"It crossed my mind, but think about it," he said. "Could they really have a strategy that says, 'Secretly give money to Congress, and go crazy for any humanitarian group that comes to town, especially if they go out into the mountain villages?'"

"I suspect that our response and their response came out of a natural desire human beings have to build bridges."

At the end of the trip, Kees Keur, the consul general in the U.S. ambassador's office, told the volunteers, "You have done more for U.S./China relations than anything my staff and I have done in our entire time in China."

"It was the act of giving that was important," said Brilliant. "We have to have new levels of interaction with China. This is one of them -- people to people."

Caption: 2 PICS

1. Putting their heart into it: Volunteers distribute medical supplies in rural China for the San Diego-based relief agency, Heart To Heart. 2. 'Act of friendship': Barbi Moore, the San Diegan who leads Heart To Heart, talks to residents on a recent visit to China. (E-4) 1,2. DEAN NELSON

■ Nelson is a journalism professor at Point Loma Nazarene College. His book about Heart To Heart International, called "Heart and Soul: Awakening Your Passion To Serve," will be available this summer.