

Repaying The Gift of Life

Chris McGuire considers himself lucky to be alive. "In 2006, I had a life-threatening medical condition," he explains. "I was very close to death. I had a bad reaction to some medicine I took, and my organs starting shutting down. I was put into a medically-induced coma for three days. So, the prognosis was not good at all. The priest came by, and the family came to say goodbye."

But then, everything changed. "It was a prayer chain that went up and down the Northeast Coast. And, on the third day, something happened. I got better. And not just better, but 100 percent better."

McGuire was saved, in part, by Dr. James T. Bopp, the former Director of Brookhaven Hospital's Emergency Room and current partner and treating physician at Stat Health in Sayville. "I wound up in the Brookhaven Emergency Room. Dr. Bopp was one of the treating physicians who saved my life."

"Dr. Bopp and I met that way, and we became very good friends... And we've gotten close over the years. In fact, I married him and his wife two summers ago here on Fire Island, at Kismet, on the beach, in my capacity as a retired judge."

Now, the two friends are looking to pay forward some of the good fortunes that have blessed them over the years. Through their new nonprofit charity HALO Mission, Inc., they are working to provide medical care and educational assistance to orphans in developing countries. According to McGuire, "I feel as though I've got a tremendous gift that I'm still here, and I've been given so much. I want to be able to give that to other people. I've got a big debt to repay. They say that people who come close to death really don't feel much anymore. I feel that way. I don't really feel any fear of failure. I think, for me, failure would be not doing anything to give back the gifts I've been given."

The HALO in the organization's name stands for Health and Learning for Orphans, and those principles are important to both McGuire and Dr. Bopp. "[My wife] Liz and I have been involved, for the course of our marriage, in helping charities that cater to children in developing countries," says McGuire. "We both feel very strongly that we had very good childhoods; we grew up in Bayport, both of us. We had good parents, and we had opportunities. And what particularly struck me is that children in these developing countries don't have those opportunities at all. We've been contributors to, most heavily, World Vision®, for probably close to 20 years... and other charities that cater to children. With the idea that, at some point in retirement, we'd be able to go and do these missions."

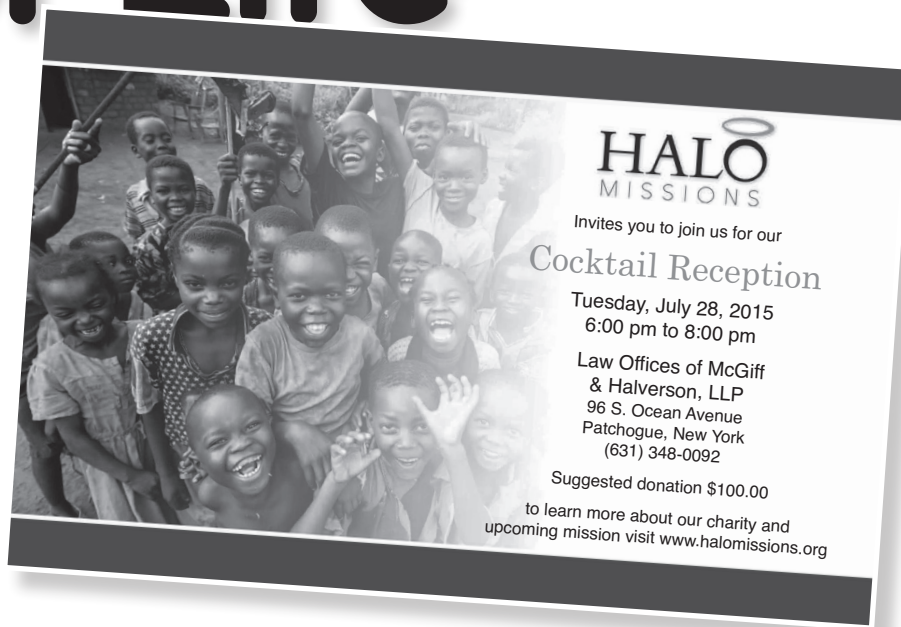
An encounter at a wedding encouraged McGuire to stop waiting for retirement to pursue mission work. "I probably hadn't done a wedding in well over a year, and wasn't getting any more calls because I had retired. I got a call from

a woman who asked me to marry her and her husband, and I told my secretary that I really don't do them anymore. When she spoke to the woman, she was very disappointed, and my secretary said, 'She's really upset. She went over your background online, about the travels you do around the world and some of the charities you've been involved in, and she really wanted you to perform the ceremony'... So, finally, I acquiesced."

At that wedding, "the bride's sister handed me a book that was written by Richard Stearns, who is the CEO and director of World Vision®, the charity that we had long supported, and she said, 'You were meant to have this.' And it was an experience I won't forget. Something like that doesn't happen to you every day. It was about a couple of weeks after my mom died, and I sort of felt that it was meant to be, for whatever reason, and I took the book home... I read the book, which was really a call to action. It talks about the plight of the extremely poor people in Third World developing nations, and especially the children... I was touched by it, and I've been thinking, as I said before, that I was going to do all of this in retirement, but I just thought *you know, what if I don't make it to retirement?* Life is really short. And I could always keep putting this thing off. We're all very busy in our lives... But, I decided I was going to find a way to set the time aside to do something more than just send a check every month."

His first action was to contact World Vision®. "[T]he woman told me that, 'we don't really have any short-term missions, but pray on it, and it will happen.' I was skeptical. And a couple of weeks later, I got an [unsolicited] email asking me to help put together a medical mission for a charity called Teen Missions, which is located in Florida and has missions around the world in Third World countries. So I got that email, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I said, 'This was something that was meant to be, and I'm going to do this.'"

"I called up my friend, Dr. Bopp, and I told him about what my ideas were and what was happening, and he said that he wanted to do this, too,



Chris and Liz and Seashore Inn



because he always wanted to do medical missions, but a lot of the problems are the time schedules and restraints. Many of these charities want a longer-term commitment out of doctors. So, we both flew down to Florida, and met the head of Teen Missions, a guy by the name of Bob Bland... [Teen Missions has] teens from all around the world come and do a boot camp and learn how to do missions and go around the world. But, they don't have doctors on staff. They have teenagers who are trained to do first aid, but they have a need for more advanced medical care."

For its first mission, HALO Missions will work with Teen Missions to provide care to orphans in Ndola, Zambia. Says McGuire, "We'll be there about six days on the ground to treat these kids – treat their medical needs, anything from prescriptions for antibiotics, antimalarials, snakebites, eye issues, antibiotic eye drops. There are enough kids who have treatable issues who can walk away and be made whole again



and be given a second chance at life."

"The idea is, when we get there, we're going straight to the pharmacy to buy as much medicine as we can. Being able to treat curable illnesses that no one should die from – an infection of a wound, [for example]. No one should go blind from an eye infection when a couple of dollars' worth of medication and treatment can save that person's sight."

As for how many people they anticipate seeing, "We expect to treat over 100 patients a day."

According to Dr. Bopp, "We can't save them all, but we are going to save as many as we can. These kids belong to all of us."

In addition to medical care, the organization will offer educational assistance to children in need. "I want to give them some money to buy books and send them to school," explains McGuire. "If they don't have uniforms, they can't go to school. If they don't have books, or pens and pencils, they can't go to school. So, it's really not too much to give back."

"I want to make sure we can give them a chance. We can't raise them, but if we can save them from a medical condition that might take their life, or if we can get them into a school so they can get an education, then we're doing something."

One of the most important aspects of HALO Missions, and what sets this small startup apart from other, larger organizations, is its financial structure. "All of the contributions that will come in will go directly to pay for medicine and for books and for education. We're all paying for our own transportation and lodging and meals – we're pay-



"I started working on Fire Island when I was 14. I was working at Watch Hill. And I worked there, off and on, for about 15 years while I was going through school. That's where I met my wife, Liz. She was a waitress there at a restaurant called the Seashore Inn. And we actually got married on the dune at Watch Hill, and we had the reception at the Seashore Inn. We named our house – you know on Fire Island people name their houses – so, we named our house the Seashore Inn, and the owner's son gave us the original sign, and it is hanging on our home here." – Chris McGuire

ing for that out of our own pockets. The beauty of having our own charity is that we can make sure that the money that comes in goes right to the kids who need it. There are no administrative costs: we're all volunteers. And we can go when we want and where we want and for the time period that we want."

When asked about his future plans for HALO Missions, McGuire responds, "Really, I've got to see where it goes. My intention is to have this thing go on, not just for a year or two, but to go on indefinitely... I'm going to see where God wants us to go. I'm going to see how this goes, and I'm going to keep working at it. I want to do this in retirement, which is probably at least ten years off for me. For now, we're going to commit to doing at least a mission a year, and if there is more interest, and it grows, we'll take it from there."

As for members of the public who are interested in supporting HALO Missions as it works to help children across the world, McGuire says, "The best thing they can do is go online, on our website [www.halomission.org], and see what we're about. Volunteer, make a donation. If a doctor or nurse reads the story and they want to come with us on this or a future mission, that would be great. If someone is financially able to make a contribution, and they are willing to do so, that would be great... [E]very dollar someone gives is going to

help kids. If someone wants to volunteer their time, they can come and help do clerical work and work the fundraisers what we're going to be having. We've got work to do. So far, we're doing it ourselves. Anyone who wants to help, we welcome that."

Dr. James Bopp and Chris McGuire are working to make a positive difference in this world, one child at a time. It's a mission they both feel strongly about. Their passion is palpable: strong enough to propel HALO Missions through many great years – and to impact thousands of children's lives.

When I spoke with Chris McGuire, it was raining across Fire Island. But as our conversation progressed, the rain turned to sunshine.

"As we were talking," he told me, "it was a beautiful rainbow that came over my house. When we got married, at Watch Hill, my wife and I, it was torrential downpour: 60-mile-an-hour winds, which blew every table setting off the back deck of the restaurant. And then there was a big rainbow, and it cooled down. That's what just happened while we were talking. Isn't that interesting?"

Anyone interested in learning more about HALO Missions should visit the organization's website, www.halomissions.org. ■

From left to right: Christopher P. McGuire, Esq., Robert Bland, Director Teen Missions, Dr. James T. Bopp, Thomas Kabwata, Teen Missions Zambia, at Teen Missions headquarters, Merritt Island, Florida

