

## Hearts join over plight of Tibetan children

### Oakmont center brings cardiac care to Himalayas

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By Ann Rodgers, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Mark Geppert, of Oakmont, was a businessman-turned-missionary in 1998 when he found himself praying beside a monk in a Buddhist monastery in the Tibet region of China.

Mr. Geppert, whose call was to visit Asian countries and pray at key public sites for God to "bless" that nation, had three times been ordered out of China for preaching without authorization. Nonetheless, he handed the monk a gospel tract, written in Tibetan.

The monk read it, and began to sob. Mr. Geppert was unsure of what was going on, but he put his arm around the monk.

When a communist party official popped out from behind a pillar, Mr. Geppert thought his time in Tibet was over. But the official thanked him for showing compassion to the monk.

And that was the odd beginning of a medical project that so far has saved the lives of nearly 100 children in Tibet who had holes in their hearts. All babies are born with these holes, which normally close in infancy. But in the thin Himalayan air, closure often fails.

The official who approached Mr. Geppert was Wang Fashung, director of International Affairs for the Public Health Bureau of the Tibet Autonomous Region. When Mr. Geppert explained that he worked for "a foundation in the United States," Dr. Wang asked whether the foundation would support a health project in Tibet. Mr. Geppert, president of the South East Asian Prayer Center, an evangelical mission based in Oakmont, saw this inquiry as an answer to a prayer.

At a meeting the next day, Dr. Wang proposed a project to detect and treat the heart defects. Unknown to Mr. Geppert, 10 years earlier, Dr. James Zuberbuhler, a cardiologist from Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, had done a pioneering study in Tibet, showing that the defect was correlated with altitude. Children's had been looking for an inroad to that largely closed land ever since.

Doctors at Children's asked to meet with Mr. Geppert and, since 2000, the center's "Touching Hearts in Tibet Project" has been working with Children's Hospital. The hospital donates the services of the surgeons and Touching Hearts pays for transportation and equipment.

### Treatment for hole in heart



Zhang Hue, then 6, photographed after heart surgery in 2000. He was one of the first Tibetan children to have a hole in his heart repaired under the Touching Hearts program.

At sea level, said Dr. Brad Keller, chief of cardiology at Children's Hospital and medical director of Touching Hearts, this heart defect can go undetected for 40 years. In Tibet, it is often deadly by adolescence.

But many children can have the hole "plugged" in a simple catheterization. Others can have it closed in open heart surgery.

The South East Asian Prayer Center's ambitious mission, spelled out in a contract with the Chinese government, is to screen every child in Tibet and provide treatment free of charge. Catheterization, done in Tibet, costs \$1,000. Open heart surgery, performed in Beijing, costs \$5,000.

As word has spread to remote villages, desperate parents no longer wait for screeners from the center to arrive. When the medical team arrived in Lhasa in October, eight families with dying children were waiting.



V.W.H. Campbell Jr., Post-Gazette

**Ken Martin displays a montage of photos of 10 Tibetan children who had successful open-heart surgery as the result of a single \$50,000 donation to the Touching Hearts in Tibet Project of the South East Asian Prayer Center in Oakmont. Mr. Martin, a board member of the center, raises money for the project, which arranges surgery and equipment used to repair altitude-related holes in the hearts of Tibetan children.**

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

**His family was once told his condition was fatal and incurable. He was healthy when doctors examined him last fall.**

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"I accepted those eight kids on the spot, which means \$40,000 has to be raised. I can't put a child back on the street," Mr. Geppert said.

But the missionary group's greatest commitment is for \$3 million to equip a catheterization lab and intensive care unit for a children's wing that the Chinese government is adding to the People's Regional Hospital in Lhasa. Northway Christian Community in Pine has pledged the first \$250,000.

Responsibility for the surgery and the equipment rests on Ken Martin, of Adams, an insurance salesman and center board member who raises money for Touching Hearts. He travels the nation, pitching heart surgery to business groups, churches and service clubs.

Variety Children's Lifeline -- an entertainment industry charity -- gives \$20,000 a year to cover travel costs for the medical team. Northway Christian Community in Pine is a mainstay, as are individual donors. Mr. Martin has a poster of 10 Tibetan children who received open heart surgery from a single gift.

"This is life and death," he said as he leafed through a photo album of beaming Tibetan children who have had surgery. "That is what I look at every single day. If I don't raise the money, there is no way they will live. With every dollar, I am saving the life of a child."

To prepare for the new hospital wing, doctors from Tibet will arrive in Pittsburgh tomorrow to study Children's Hospital. On Friday and Saturday, they will meet with U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., and Surgeon General Richard Carmona in Washington, D.C. They will be at the March 12 services of Northway at 9 and 11 a.m. A farewell banquet will be held at Riverside Community Church Student Life Center in Oakmont at 7 p.m. March 14.

The most remarkable aspect of the program's contract with China is not medical, but religious. The missionary group has written permission to tell the families of all children it screens and treats that this service is offered in the name of Christ, and to explain the Christian faith to them.

All sick children are treated no matter what their parents believe, Mr. Geppert said. Some families have professed Christianity, though Buddhism is so flexible that it's hard to tell who has converted and who has added Jesus to other deities, he said.

"As a Christian organization, we have a Jewish medical director and work with Buddhists in a communist hospital," Mr. Geppert said.

Touching Hearts in Tibet, he said, "is supported by Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, Jews and secularists."

The International Campaign for Tibet, which supports the Dalai Lama, exiled head of state and spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, said that in Tibet, Chinese authorities often turn a blind eye toward Christian missionaries who would be stopped elsewhere in the nation.

Kate Saunders, communications director for the campaign, suspects that China wants to dilute the influence of Tibetan Buddhism. But she also believes Mr. Geppert does valuable work.

"There are very great needs in Tibet with regard to health. If some evangelical groups can come in and provide practical support, then that is to be welcomed," she said.

Dr. Keller, who is Jewish, said he has never seen anyone with the program pressure anyone to convert. He was comfortable enough with the group's spiritual ethos to recruit a friend who is a pediatric cardiologist in Japan and a devout Zen Buddhist.

"It's a great group. They are doing great work," he said.

For more information contact [www.seapc.us](http://www.seapc.us) or 412-826-9063.

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