

Kurt and Toree Wilkening—Applegaters with a vision

BY DIANA COOGLE

There was once a little girl in the Dominican Republic who scowled all the time, never paid attention in school, and was always unhappy. One day a mobile clinic from AmigoVision rolled into the village and put her through a series of stations—medical history, eye exams, dilation—until, finally, diagnosis. The child was cross-eyed and had blurry vision. When the appropriate prescription glasses were handed to her, she put them on and broke into a glorious smile, the first her mother had seen for years.

For ten years, two Applegaters, Kurt and Toree Wilkening, have traveled the world through AmigoVision, the nonprofit organization they started, putting smiles on people's faces by putting a pair of eyeglasses on their noses.

Kurt opened an optometry practice in Medford in 1981. His wife Toree was a travel agent but stepped outside that field to help run the practice. They both love to travel, especially to out-of-the-way places, the more different from America the better. By 2000, when Kurt's practice was stable enough that he could leave the office more, he and Toree started thinking about how they could combine

travel, medical expertise, and service.

As a member of the Bear Creek Valley Rotary Club, Kurt was inspired by a fellow Rotarian's Project Amigo, which educates children of migrant workers in Mexico, and by a volunteer eye-care project he and Toree attended in Jamaica. Could they, maybe, bring eyeglasses to some of the seven hundred million people around the world who have no access to basic vision care? Could they travel to remote villages around the world to diagnose vision problems and provide corrective lenses?

Yes, they could, with the founding of AmigoVision, which takes a mobile clinic into villages sometimes so remote the inhabitants have no transportation to go outside the village. So the clinic goes to them. In some places people come to the clinic on horseback. In other places villagers speak a language that needs four levels of translation for communication.

Kurt and Toree and their team see as many as 1,250 patients a week. They correct problems of half of those with simple reading glasses and of half the remaining with prescription glasses. Perhaps most importantly, they train people in the countries they visit to

carry on the work of the clinic when AmigoVision leaves. "The goal is not to see as many patients as possible and then blow out," Kurt says, "but to make it a sustainable program." When Kurt and Toree and their volunteer crew are ready to leave the country, they ceremoniously turn over the keys to the native people they've been training and give them the clinic equipment, including a computer with the program on it that enables them to match the patient's prescription with glasses the team has in stock.

At first Kurt and Toree took suitcases full of donated eyeglasses on their travels, but the problem with prescription glasses is that the prescription is difficult to match to exactly what the patient needs. Now they bring round lenses, ground in various prescriptions, and frames, which are easier to pack than glasses, and make "Wilk's glasses" on site by a method Kurt invented.

"You should see the looks on the faces when people put on the eyeglasses for the first time," Kurt says. Toree adds that often they say, "Now I can read the Bible."

Kurt and Toree freely admit that the advantages are not all to the recipients of eye care. They and the volunteers they

take with them get so much out of it that "the payback is unfair," as Kurt puts it. Not only are they experiencing "exotic" parts of the world, but their own eyes are being opened. "The effect it has on our volunteers is unbelievable," Kurt says. "They come home with a different perspective on the world, on America, on how the world sees America, and, especially, on the opportunities they can find to help in their local communities."

The needs in many places around the world are very basic. The things that change a person's life are often things we take for granted—like a pair of glasses. In many of the countries where AmigoVision goes, for instance, the extended family depends on one member who is particularly good at something—a woman at sewing, for instance—to do that job for the family. As she ages, though, she can no longer see to sew, and her skills become useless. Then a mobile eye clinic comes to the village, she gets a pair of reading glasses, and her world changes dramatically.

The first year Kurt and Toree took AmigoVision to Jamaica. Last year, with the help of the Future Business Leaders Association at Hidden Valley High School, they took it to Josephine County. Next year they'll go to both Josephine and Jackson counties—and to Nepal, if things work out, and then to Ethiopia, maybe even to Cuba. They have already traveled with the clinic to Jamaica, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Peru, Vietnam, and Thailand.

Eyeglasses are often an instant and a dramatic fix, but the recipients aren't always pleased. What gets in the way? Vanity, all around the world.

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Photos, left to right: Toree at a Chang Dao, Thailand, clinic where the eyes of over 850 Karen hill tribal people were examined; After two weeks in Thailand, the team visited Angkor Watt in Siem Reap, Cambodia; Not only could this woman see to sew again, but she wanted to marry Kurt.



Porscha Schiller and the Rising Star program

BY DIANA COOGLE

If, as Steve Jobs told us, "Creativity is just connecting things," Porscha Schiller, manager of South Stage Cellars tasting room in Jacksonville, might deserve an award for creative genius. By connecting three of her interests, she created the idea that became the phenomenally successful Rising Stars program.

First, there was Porscha's love of music and her discovery, when she moved here from New York City, of the extraordinarily good quality of local music. "Why haven't I heard of you?" she kept asking one group after another, always receiving the same answer: "We can't get any exposure."

Second, there was Porscha's job and the need to promote the tasting room. "It's like peanut butter and jelly," she says, "to pair music and wine."

Finally, there was Porscha's volunteer work with Mediation Works, which brought the important work of CASA, Court Appointed Special Advocates, to her attention and sparked a desire to support its local program.

One, two, three—and Porscha had conceived of the Rising Stars program: local musicians of any genre—jazz, folk, classical, any kind of music—would apply to play at South Stage Cellars. (This year three different groups played every Saturday in February—four groups the

first Saturday because the judges couldn't pare the entries down to 12.) People would come to the tasting room—no cover charge—to drink wine, hear the music, and vote, at \$2 per vote with a ceiling of \$30, for their favorite musicians. The resulting income would be given to a local nonprofit organization. A panel of judges including Porscha and members of the Britt Festivals board would pick the winner from the chosen finalists. (They announced the 2014 winner on March 1, as the *Applegater* was being mailed.)

"I am a firm believer that when you throw a pebble into the water, the ripples can reach across the world," Porscha says (adding that she hopes that doesn't sound "too granola").

Among the most important of the many ripples from the Rising Stars pebble that Porscha threw into the waters of the Applegate community are those that reach the musicians. To play on the Britt stage, to have a 30-minute interview on Jefferson Public Radio—these prizes are the "real cherry," as Porscha calls them, but the prestige of being that year's Rising Star and the fun of participating also entice applicants. "To be chosen is incredible," said last year's winner, Matt Hill, of the Matt Hill Trio. "It's amazing—especially on the stage of the Britt. I never thought

I'd be standing here. [It's] an absolute dream." But winning isn't everything. One performer said that her main reason for being there was just to have fun. "And I had a blast," she said, "I had so much fun."

Ripples also reach other people in the community who jump in to help. Porscha gratefully acknowledges that without Donna Briggs, the head of Britt Festivals who involved Britt in the idea from its beginning, Rising Stars would not be as successful as it is. She credits Kim Moulton for helping coordinate the event and "doing the whole thing" with her, and says that if it weren't for Traute and Don Moore, owners of South Stage Cellars and Quail Run Vineyards, the whole thing wouldn't happen. "I'm proud to be a part of this," she says, as though she were just a flunky in the project, "and of these owners."

Other community members and local businesses have helped in various ways. Some have donated prizes: a cash prize from Brenda Smith, a Harry and David packet, a recording session with Blackstone Audio. This year Dan Doshier, of Off the Wall Music Company in Jacksonville, provided the sound system at South Stage Cellars. "What a gift!" Porscha says, adding that the whole experience "has been very magical."

A big ripple, of course, reaches the local nonprofit chosen to receive the money. The first year Rising Stars raised \$7,000 for CASA. The second year Traute and Don Moore, mindful of their many Hispanic workers at the vineyards, suggested the \$12,000 proceeds go to La Clinica. This year the money will go to Britt Festivals for its educational programs—music in



Porscha Schiller (right) with Traute Moore, owner of South Stage Cellars and Quail Run Vineyards.

schools and music camps. "If music is left out of a child's life," Porscha reminds us, "there is so much that is not developing in that child."

Porscha sees the Jacksonville community—any small community—as composed of layers of different kinds of people interacting together. She points to people like Rising Stars performers—carpenters, some of them, and farmers and even (last year's winner) a dentist—as the threads that hold together the fabric of a community because they work with each other. "If we all had the opportunity to live in a smaller community," she says, "we would be nicer people—if only so we wouldn't be embarrassed by not having been nice to someone on the street whom we later find sitting next to us on the bus."

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