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## Cover Story

### Ahimsa, A Way of Life

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**Priya M Menon**



More than six years ago, Purnima Toolsidass, an animal welfare activist, was amazed when she received an email from the Winsome Constance Kindness Trust in Australia. The sender was entrepreneur-turned- humanitarian Philip Wollen.

“I don’t know how Phil got to know of us, but he wrote saying he is interested in supporting our activities,” says Purnima, Trustee, Compassionate Crusaders Trust and People For Animals Kolkata,.

“Maybe he had read about our managing trustee, Debasis Chakrabarti, who is well-known. A number of foreign trusts as well as individuals support us and maybe Phil heard about us from one of his contacts.”

The first donation he sent, about Rs one lakh, came just in time as the organisation was in debt with the suppliers of medicine and fuel.

“We were worried they would not extend out credit,” says Purnima.

“He is an exceptionally rare, kind and generous person who speaks out against cruelty and exploitation and I hope at least a few emulate his noble example.”

This is but one of the numerous instances when Wollen has lent a helping hand to many a worthy cause in India.

What makes Wollen’s Trust unique is the way it functions. Organisations cannot apply for a grant. Instead, Philip and Trix network with about 9,000 people across the globe to gather information about little-known organisations.

“We call them low cost probes,” says Wollen. For instance, if he wants to know about a shelter being run in some remote corner of

Sunday Treat

The Great Kidney Bazaar

India, he would have one of his friends in the area casually check it out for him. For such people, like Purnima, it is pretty much like “a bolt from the blue” when they get a letter from the Trust, informing them that they have been awarded a grant and asking for their bank account number. “It is very demeaning for them to have to ask,” says Wollen. “And also heartening to think that someone in the West has heard about them.” All the grants are unconditional and the Trust never asks for reports or micromanage the groups.

Wollen has been named Australian of the Year 2007 by the state of Victoria and has also featured in the Queen’s Birthday Honours list in 2005. But he has his roots firmly entrenched in India.

This “boy from Bangalore” who migrated to Australia at the age of 18 is the founder of the Winsome Constance Kindness Trust that works for animals, children and the environment. Of the 350-odd groups that the Trust supports the world over, 55 of them are based in India. “India is truly the jewel in our crown,” says Wollen, also the chief patron of Visakha SPCA in Bangalore.

In Chennai recently with wife Trix to attend the Asia for Animals Conference 2007, Wollen was busy doing what he does best – using his money efficiently to support a just cause. This time round, he is trying to create an umbrella organisation for the numerous animal welfare organisations in India.

“There are so many animal welfare groups in India, but they don’t speak with one voice,” says Wollen. What he envisions is an organisation which will provide information about animal welfare issues, highlight problems, lobby with the government, write for newspapers, and promote vegetarianism. Wollen is willing to spend Rs three lakhs per annum on the project and support it for five years.

The zeal and enthusiasm with which he talks about his projects is infectious. What emerges is the picture of a man who has combined his sense of business with the vision of a more humane world.

True to character, Wollen’s recent visit to India has been peppered with acts of kindness, bringing a ray of hope to many. In Bangalore, Wollen looked up former classmate George Wadforth (who has acted in movies like Lagaan, in which he played the umpire, a policeman and an English gentleman in a ballroom sequence). “He was blind, poor and barefoot, living in a tiny room near a vegetable shop that he could only crawl into,” says Wollen, a former student of Bishop Cotton Boys’ School who was meeting Wadforth after 40 years. Moved by Wadforth’s plight the Wollens met the entire expenses of George’s eye surgery.

His compassion has also brought some solace to seven-year-old Ravi who lost his legs after being hit by a lorry. Wollen, who met the surgeon, paid the hospital bill of Rs 2.5 lakh. “His father earns just Rs 1,500 a month,” says Wollen, who is in constant touch with Ravi’s social worker, Sylvia Sharma.

Wollen is quick to act once he identifies a worthy cause. And expects the same of others. Visiting an orphanage in Bangalore, he realised that they were very cramped for space. “All they wanted was a bag of rice but I saw that they needed to double their size,” says Wollen. He agreed to give the Rs 10 lakh required, provided they began building the very same day.

Wollen's Indian connection goes back a long way. "Four or five generations of my family have lived in India; in fact we believe that my grandfather was born in Chennai though we cannot figure out where," he says. "My uncle MSD Wollen was Chief Air Marshal and retired as the chairman of HAL." Wollen himself spent the first 18 years of his life in Bangalore.

After migrating to Australia, Wollen made his mark specialising in the "Wall Street kind of business". By the age of 35, he was the most head hunted executive in Australia. At 38, he was voted the best entrepreneur. On his 40th birthday, Wollen, then VP of Citibank, took the decision that would change his life from being merely successful to being "significant". After visiting a slaughterhouse, the merchant banker decided to give up the world of mergers and acquisitions and devote himself to humanitarian causes. He established the Winsome Constance Kindness Trust (named after his mother and grandmother). The mission statement of the Trust is "to promote kindness towards all other living beings and enshrine it as a recognisable trait in the Australian character and culture."

The Trust builds schools, clinics, orphanages and shelters. "We don't fundraise," says Wollen, who wants to "give everything away before I die with warm hands".

All the work of the Trust is done by Wollen and Trix, for whom early mornings and late evenings are part of a typical working day as they often work two time zones. "We get about 400 e-mails a day," says Trix, who has also designed the Trust's website.

The duo is also quick to act in times of crisis. When the Tsunami struck in 2004, Philip and Trix raced from Adelaide to Melbourne to give instructions to their bankers. "We were too far away to help physically but money is always needed for labour, food and transportation," says Wollen, who sent more than a crore to India in the first 48 hours.

A staunch vegan, for Wollen the most beautiful word ever written is – ahimsa. Trix visits the kitchen of every Indian hotel they stay in – to take lessons in vegan cooking from the chefs.

More than anything else, Wollen hopes that other wealthy people will emulate his model. And the website tries to achieve just that, providing a list of organisations that work for non human animals as well as human animals that they hold in high esteem, proclaiming: "We strongly recommend them to philanthropists who are serious about getting maximum "bang for their buck". We have satisfied ourselves that these groups are in it for the "long haul". Consequently, they are ideal candidates to receive bequests under the wills of philanthropic people."

"Wealthy people (in business and the professions) don't have the time, experience or the knowledge which we have. So they trust us to do the hard investigative work on the ground," he says. "They believe that if I am putting my own money into a project, I would not be doing it lightly. So they follow my lead. They ask us to recommend a list of quality groups."

Some of the groups that have been selected so far include Animals Asia Foundation (China Moon Bears), Society for the Protection of Animal Rights in Egypt (SPARE), Animed Arad (Shelter in Romania), Leo Tolstoy CETA (The Ukraine), Beirut for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Lebanon), Save a Dog Scheme (Australia) and Sea

Wollen also hopes to get the Indian diaspora to support Indian groups. ``But Indians in Australia have been parsimonious in supporting causes back home. And some of them are very well off," says Wollen, never one to mince his words. ``The Jews, Italians and Greeks have done it very well. I admire them greatly."

### Let them fly

Wollen's Kindness House in Melbourne, provides modern office facilities for about 150 NGOs from all over the world. Wollen has just one demand – that the people who work there ``do not consume animals on its premises". At the entrance of Kindness House is a large bird cage whose bars have been ripped open, the edges painted red. On one side is a couple of lines from William Blake's Auguries of Innocence:

*A robin redbreast in a cage  
Puts all heaven in a rage*

On the other side is the tenet that Wollen firmly believes in:  
*In their capacity to feel fear, pain, hunger and thirst, a pig is a dog is a bear ... is a boy.*



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