

Hearts of Gold

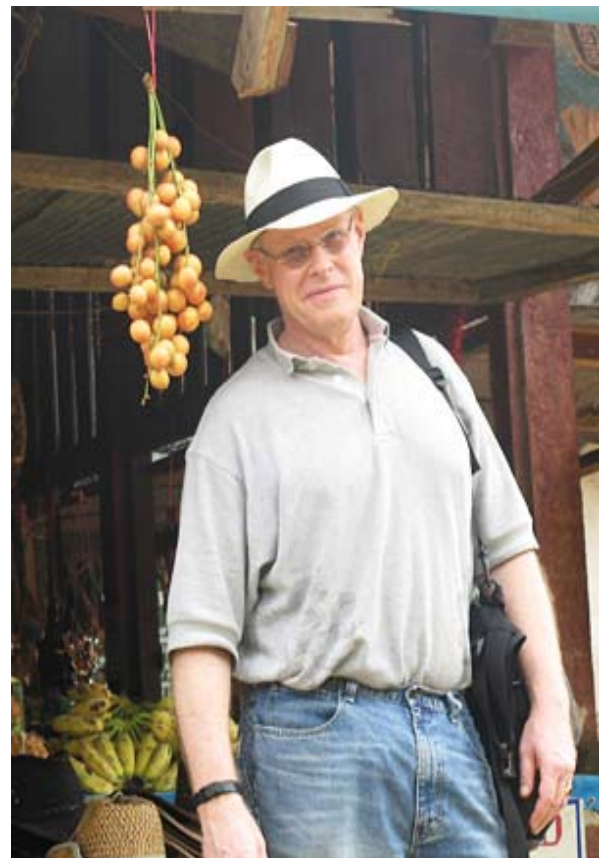
The Warm Heart foundation, created by professor emeritus D. Michael Shafer, relies on ambitious ideals and Rutgers volunteers to improve the lives of the impoverished living in the remote regions of Thailand. **By Bill Glovin**

Tara DeWorsop RC'08 had never traveled alone, but that changed abruptly when she took a 15-hour flight to northern Thailand in the summer of 2008 after graduating from Rutgers–New Brunswick. She had accepted a six-month fellowship offered by Warm Heart, a foundation created by D. Michael Shafer, professor emeritus of political science at Rutgers, to improve the lives of impoverished people living in the remote regions of Thailand. When the fellowship ended, DeWorsop had been so moved by the experience that she decided to stay for another six months.

DeWorsop is one of about 20 Rutgers students whose experience at Shafer's Warm Heart (warmheartworldwide.org) has helped them find direction in their young lives. "Warm Heart offers a remarkable educational experience for students who want to enter the field of human rights or to eradicate poverty," says Shafer. "Rutgers kids often get internships with big human-rights organizations in New York City and spend most of their time making photo copies and getting coffee. When a student comes to work for us, they are in the field from day one."

Throughout his career, Shafer, a charismatic, energetic man, had mentored hundreds of Rutgers students who are considering service-leadership careers. He and his wife, Evelind Schecter, relocated to Thailand to start a foundation to help a region where desperate teenagers migrate to cities to work as prostitutes or laborers, where ethnic minorities in isolated, mountainous villages in hill tribes (each with its own customs, language, dress, and spiritual beliefs) have no medicine or education, and where farmers in the lowlands lack clean water and places to sell their produce.

Although the civil unrest in Bangkok during the spring has had no impact on the work of the foundation, Shafer points out that Thailand is a middle-income country with terrible income inequality. "The result is a small, obscenely rich upper-middle class and a huge poverty-stricken majority," he says. "Despite all of the same advantages of the rest of the countries in its pool, Thailand has simply never lived up to expectations. Why? Too many hands are able to take too much money out of the pot with impunity."



Former Rutgers political science professor Michael Shafer founded Warm Heart with his wife, Evelind Schecter. *Photography by Daniel Christopher*

Beginning in 1994, Shafer served for 10 years as the director of the Rutgers Citizenship and Service Education (CASE) program (now the Civic Engagement and Service Education Partnership Program), and he founded Global PACT (Partnerships for Activism and Cross-Cultural Training) in 2002 as an offshoot of a CASE program based in Mongolia. *The New York Times Magazine* called CASE “the most extensive experiment in America on the integration of volunteerism into the curriculum and its effectiveness as an education in citizenship.”

In 1993, President Bill Clinton visited Rutgers to recognize the CASE program as a model for the nation’s colleges and universities. By 1995, CASE was an AmeriCorps service site, offering 70 classes to 2,000 service-learning students. “When we recruited professors, we used to say, ‘Make New Jersey your classroom.’ At Global PACT, the idea was to make the world your classroom,” says Shafer. “Warm Heart applies the values originally embodied in CASE and Global PACT—to provide tools so that the citizens in Chiang Mai Province can compete in the global marketplace.”

While at Rutgers, Shafer and Schechter adopted four children and raised 20 others, most between the ages of 8 and 14, kids who had been abused, spent years in foster care, abused drugs, were members of refugee families splintering under the strain of life in the United States. And the couple took care of young, single mothers as well. “Everyone had their chores and encouraged their brothers and sisters to confront their demons,” says Shafer. “We may have had the frankest and most fun-filled dinner table in New Jersey.”

Shafer, who had taken Rutgers students to Mongolia, the Balkans, Cambodia, and Thailand to develop them into future international service leaders, was looking for a new challenge. He believed a new foundation in some impoverished region in the world would allow him to put his teaching and organizational skills to better use. On a 2007 training mission to find ways to fight the epidemic of human trafficking in Mae Sai, a major crossing point on the northern Thai–Myanmar border, he decided that Thailand was where a nongovernmental organization to help the local people could do the most good. “I considered Mae Sai, but a Thai colleague suggested his home district, Chiang Mai, which is Thailand’s second poorest province and not as crowded,” says Shafer.

At the age of 55, Shafer retired from Rutgers in the spring of 2009, spent his life savings, and founded Warm Heart, keeping his New Jersey home so that their extended family could continue to live in Highland Park. After the July groundbreaking, he instructed the Rutgers students to begin by asking villagers, government officials, and members of sewing circles what the region lacked—and needed. They heard the same refrain: “Our culture is dying. We must save it.” “Our children need education. We are poor. We must learn to start businesses.”

One of the first tasks was to build housing for the hill tribe children, who wished to attend Warm Heart’s school. Parents are unable to bring their children to the school during the rainy season, when unpaved roads turn to mud. Amy Owen DC’96 took a leave-of-absence from her elementary school teaching position in a tough East Los Angeles neighborhood to help Warm Heart develop a curriculum. She arrived in Thailand in July 2009. A former student representative to the Rutgers Board of Governors, a *Daily Targum* columnist, and a Shafer protégé, she had worked for corporations and nonprofit organizations after graduating in 1996. In July 2002, she moved to Los Angeles, learned Spanish, and became a teacher.

By the time her work was complete in March 2010, the Warm Heart school had grown from 15 students attending classes three times a week to 150 students attending six days a week. “Thai public schools, especially in rural areas, are rigidly didactic and place a heavy emphasis on rote memorization,” she says. “Even after enduring that drill-and-kill environment for nine hours, kids from the ages of 5 to 17 would show up for English and math class every weekday, and then arrive an hour early for all-day Saturday school. I was inspired.”

Unlike Owen, DeWorsop was unsure how she could best contribute. An anthropology major at Rutgers–New Brunswick, she had become enamored with Shafer while taking his political science course, “Activism and Advocacy,” in the spring of 2008. “Dr. Shafer inspired me to think I could make a difference,” says DeWorsop, whose first task was to help construct the Spirit House, a place where the local population had a suitable setting to honor its traditions. Its completion was celebrated with a feast centered on a pig’s head, a source of considerable queasiness for DeWorsop. She found her place helping in one of the microenterprise projects, working with a collective of 22 women to use the region’s abundance of silkworms to grow, spin, and dye silk thread before weaving it into scarves, shawls, and bags.

DeWorsop, who is still involved in Warm Heart through its offices in Highland Park, works with the Rutgers Habitat for Humanity chapter to sell the collective’s silk and paper products on the New Brunswick Campus and to local stores. “Our initial sales in American retail stores enabled us to pay the microenterprise collective 35,000 BOT (the equivalent of about \$1,000),” she says. “The women leading the collective burst into tears. It was more money than they had ever seen, and they used it to buy clothes and put food on the table.”

In Thailand, “the land of smiles” where the population consists of people who are short and slight, few had seen anybody as large as Gaudhi De Sedas UC’08. A former linebacker on the Scarlet Knights football team and a political science major, De Sedas spent 11 months as a Rutgers Center for Global Security and Democracy postgrad fellow, working as an athletic counselor, producing marketing materials for the microenterprise project, and deriving strategies for improving programs. To motivate Warm Heart’s Thai staff, he applied many of the team-building ideas and methods that he had learned from Rutgers head football coach Greg Schiano.

“The locals used to say ‘Gaudhi, we live here; we’re not going anywhere,’” says De Sedas, today a graduate student at the Center for International Conflict Resolution at Columbia University. “So if their own ideas and motivation fueled the change in their situations, we would have an organization that would achieve sustainable community development.”

Soon after deciding to start Warm Heart, Shafer made a presentation to student members of Rutgers Engineers Without Borders (EWB) at their Busch Campus office. Improving water delivery in nearby villages, he knew, was one of his first priorities. David Pal, then a first-year student, was “blown away by Dr. Shafer’s passion, his intelligence and sincerity, and his willingness to use his life savings to make it happen. I had never met someone so committed to helping others.”

Pal, now a senior, was part of a four-person EWB team that spent about a month in the summer of 2008 diagnosing the water problems in Nong Bua, a farming village of 500 residents that was a mile-and-a-half away from the project under way through Warm Heart. They returned the following summer, this time with a retired chemical engineer with 40 years of experience, to design and build a water-delivery system. Pal plans to make other trips during the winter break of 2011 and, after graduating in May, to begin work at other villages. “Clean water will help reduce disease, especially gastronomic problems,” says Pal, whose involvement with Warm Heart has inspired him with the idea of starting a firm that works on site remediation in developing nations. “What struck me was how grateful the Thai people were to have us, and to help us in any way they could.”

From one summer to the next, Pal witnessed enormous progress in educational and business opportunities—and lots of enthusiasm for Warm Heart. “Dr. Shafer was just as effective there as he was talking to the EWB group,” he says. “Whenever we needed something, such as a translator or finding motor bikes to help us get around, he made sure we got it. He was organized and in control but considerate and respectful of tradition. People listened to him and respected what he had to say.”

Much of the progress is because of the participation of more than 20 interns, fellows, and volunteers, many affiliated with Rutgers, who have followed their former professor to Thailand. Shafer’s goals remain ambitious: raise the average level of education beyond the sixth-grade; open health care clinics and

make them accessible to isolated mountainous villages during the rainy season; raise awareness of AIDS/HIV and bring care to 1,800 infected citizens; train first responders for medical emergencies; create jobs and opportunities to work; raise the average monthly wage above \$70; and integrate the disabled into communities.

Sometimes, however, the foundation simply adjusts to unforeseen events. In mid May, two Red Berets (Thai Green Berets) arrived and asked Warm Heart to take in seven children. Despite Shafer's plea that there were no beds for them, a pick up truck soon arrived with three children, their mothers, and bags of rice. The desperate mothers convinced Shafer that their children were in danger and, a few days later, a contingent from Warm Heart headed for their village on the Burmese border to pick up the four remaining children. They left with five children, and none had underwear or shoes.

In light of such events, says Shafer, Bangkok's problems seem far away. In selecting the name Warm Heart, he used a Thai phrase that means "to embrace." "We're not about disaster relief or charity, and we don't give things or promise outcomes," he says. "We will, however, embrace as many people as *we* can and do everything in our power so that the individual has the opportunity to do the best *they* can." •

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