

HENRI LANDWIRTH

**Recipient of the 2004 Jimmy
and Rosalynn Carter Award for
Humanitarian Contributions to
the Health of Humankind**

From its very beginnings, even when as a colony governed by Europeans, the United States of America has been the open door of opportunity for immigrants from around the world. For them, the New World is literally the world made new. But it has always been a two-way street. If the United States has provided opportunities to immigrants, then it has also benefited from their contributions. There are countless examples, but perhaps none better than Henri Landwirth, this year's recipient of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind.

An immigrant from World War II's war-torn Europe, Mr. Landwirth arrived in the United States in the late 1940's with \$20 in his pocket. Today he is a partner in a successful Florida hotel concern. But Mr. Landwirth is more than an entrepreneurial success story. He has turned his good fortune to the benefit of others less fortunate.

Mr. Landwirth was born in Belgium in 1927. His youth was scarred by the Nazi occupation of Europe and the deportation of Jews to concentration camps in Poland. In his column, "Profiles in Courage," Val Halmandaris writes how the young Landwirth saw friends and families separated and living in desperate circumstances merely because they were Jewish. The Nazis imprisoned and later shot his father. His mother was drowned on a refugee ship deliberately sunk by the Germans. He and his twin sister, Margot, were separated and sent to concentration camps. He was shuttled between the Auschwitz, Matthausen and Ostrowitz prison camps. To this day he bears his prison

identification, B4343, tattooed on his left forearm, a reminder, as he says, of the horrors perpetrated by Nazi Germany against humanity.

In 1945, as World War II drew to a close, he was marched into the woods to be shot. But, at the last minute, a German soldier decided to spare his life and told him to run. He ran for days until he collapsed and eventually was cared for by a Czechoslovakian couple who nursed him back to health. "It's only a miracle that I am alive today," he says.

In 1950 Mr. Landwirth emigrated to the United States. With the Korean War underway he was drafted into the US Army. After his discharge from military service and being eligible for educational grants under the GI Bill of Rights, the young man decided to make a career in hotel management. While working in New York he learned everything about the hotel business. One story from those days is that he bribed the night accountant with a bottle of whiskey so that he could



learn how to become a night auditor.

Mr. Landwirth married in 1954 and moved to Florida. He worked as a short order cook but eventually his hotel experience in New York got him the job of managing the Starlite Motel in Cocoa Beach. The location, next to Cape Canaveral where the United States was developing its launch site for the “Man in Space” program, proved fortuitous. The seven Project Mercury astronauts, including Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, Gus Grissom, Alan Shepard, Wally Shirra, Deke Slayton and John Glenn, stayed in the Starlite Motel when they came to Florida.

As Walter Cronkite, who covered those early days of space exploration for CBS, relates, Mr. Landwirth forged lifetime friendships with the astronauts. It was at his urging that they created the Mercury Seven Foundation, now known as the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation that provides scholarships to young science students.

Today, Mr. Landwirth is a partner in a flourishing central Florida hotel company and he has used his suc-

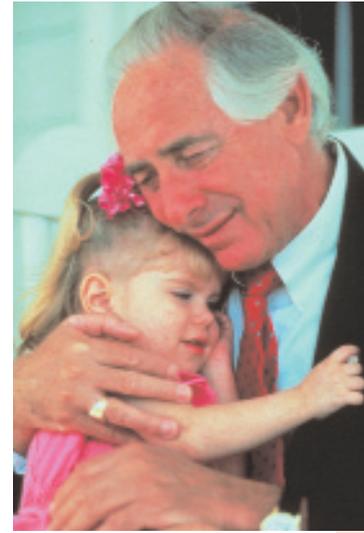


cess in business as the basis for helping those in need. He hired and trained the mentally handicapped. In 1970 an award from the Florida Association of Retarded Children recognized these efforts. He built a clinic to help children with cerebral palsy that won him the United Cerebral Palsy Association’s Humanitarian Award in 1977.

During the 1970’s, Mr. Landwirth founded the Fanny Landwirth Foundation. Named in honor of his mother, the foundation has funded many charitable organizations and has built a senior citizen center and children’s school in Orlando.

In 1986 he founded a non-profit organization called Give Kids the World, that gives terminally ill children and their families a week’s vacation in central Florida with its famous attractions such as Disney World, Universal Studios and Sea World. The goal, Mr. Landwirth notes, was to fulfill the wishes of dying children, most of whom had asked to meet Mickey Mouse. In its first year 329 children benefited through this foundation. Today more than 60,000 children and their families from the United States and 45 countries around the world have received the gift of a week-long Disney-like experience.

Subsequently Mr. Landwirth donated a million dollars to the building of a village on a 51-acre site, including 96 specially designed villas and whimsically built recreation complex, capable of accommodating 7,000 families a year. “It is a magical place, and gives these children a retreat from their world of hospitals and medical treatments,” says Florida Congressman Bill Nelson.



Mr. Landwirth has continued his philanthropic efforts. In 1999 he founded Dignity U Wear, a national organization that provides new clothing for children and their families who are homeless, abused, abandoned, or otherwise neglected. The organization has distributed over 500,000 items of new clothes to well over 40,000 individuals and supports 100 shelters in 16 states. In 2004 Dignity-U-Wear is projected to distribute new clothing valued

at over \$18 Million to 300 agencies in 30 States. Mr. Landwirth believes that, by providing these families with new clothing, they will regain their dignity and self worth giving them hope for a new beginning.

Commenting on all these efforts to help children, Mr. Landwirth says that it is his duty to give something back. “You’ve got to give of yourself—not just money but the essence of yourself. That is what makes life meaningful.”

By helping others there is little question that Henri Landwirth has made a meaningful life for himself. His philosophy is perhaps best epitomized in a quotation from Winston Churchill. It is a favorite of his and is inscribed in the walkway of the village, Give Kids the World: “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.”

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