

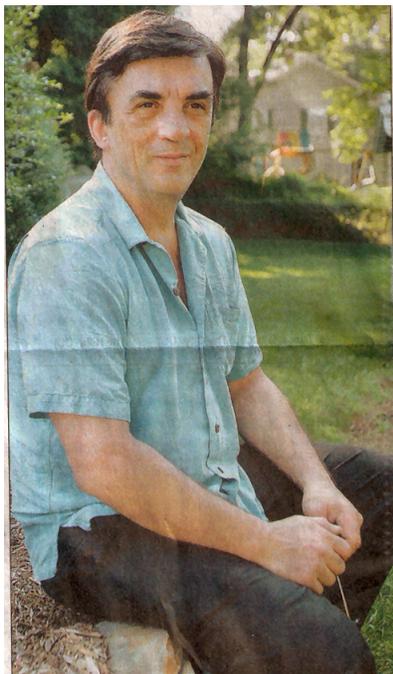
Daily Record

SERVING MORRIS COUNTY FOR MORE THAN 100 YEARS

October 4, 2009

Morristown native's organizations making a difference

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SPECIAL TO THE DAILY RECORD



Morristown native and founder of the nonprofit organization Hands of Humanity, Costa "Gus" Mavraganis, is the embodiment of the word "humanitarian." Yet he'll still be the first to insist that he's "no great person."

The Culinary Institute of America graduate spent 20 years in the restaurant business (his wife, a fellow CIA grad, owns Kristine's Dessert Works in Randolph), but these days the former pastry chef is bringing something a little sweeter to the people of underserved nations in the Caribbean and South America: fresh water, food, vitamins and other essentials most Americans take for granted.

Recently Mavraganis, 50, collected baseball equipment to present to children in the Dominican Republic -- children who had been playing with sugar canes for bats and plastic water bottles for baseballs. A Hands of Humanity partner in Palave has already established a youth baseball league to help keep the kids off the streets.

"There are so many well-intentioned people who can gather lots of money, but they never ask the people they're trying to help what they really need," he said.

Mavraganis' current project is renovating a church in the Dominican Republic to serve as a community center: there are more than 6,000 people there with no services, he said. On one trip, the organization's medical team sponsored a free clinic day, and "the line was half a mile long," he said. In Haiti, there are 4 million people living without access to clean water, and he aims to ensure that supply lines are set up and wells are drilled and that locals are trained how to use and repair the water pumps correctly.

"It really does become addicting when you go somewhere and help people even just a little bit, and they're so appreciative," Mavraganis said. "Once you see all of this stuff, how can you walk away from it?"

Upon leaving restaurants in Morris Plains, Randolph and Morristown as a result of injuries sustained in a 1998 automobile accident, and then being laid off from a corporate Internet Manager position after 10 years, Mavraganis ended up pursuing a more flexible career in real estate and home energy auditing. That's when he was able to devote more of his time to Hands Of Humanity and the Cuba AIDS Project; Mavraganis has now been serving as the organization's program director for nearly a decade. "I'm usually out of the country about four times a year," he said.

The Cuba AIDS Project arranges legal trips to Cuba (a special license was acquired to enable travel to the country) for certified health care providers, translators fluent in both English and Spanish, and



HIV/AIDS workers/volunteers with documented experience to support patients and their families in Cuba.

"The purpose is to educate them about HIV/AIDS: what it is, how to take care of their bodies, and how not to spread it. We help them get their medication and the right food, and it's all helped to keep the spread of AIDS really low in Cuba," Mavraganis said.

Hands of Humanity, his second organization, is a nonprofit, nonpolitical and nonreligious international organization that focuses on sustainable projects in rural regions of the developing world. The

organization rounds up groups of travelers to volunteer in the areas of water, sanitation, housing, education, and economic relief.

"It kind of grew out of the effect I saw on the people who came to Cuba. Most Americans are totally clueless about what the rest of the world is like," he said. "People fly into Puerto Plata and stay in these beautiful resorts, but about 300 feet away, there are houses falling down."

Though volunteers are housed in cities outside of the devastated areas and are granted plenty of time to explore on their own, the organization provides them with the opportunity to see first-hand the way people in other parts of the world live -- and, hopefully, inspires them to continue making efforts to change the lives of others.

However, Mavraganis insists that, in most cases, the trip becomes a life-changing experience. In 2004, one Cuba Aids Project participant who was employed at a nonprofit organization in Texas ended up packing her bags and launching a nonprofit of her own in Mozambique, he said.

"The life you change might be your own. That's (our) motto because it really does change your perspective on life," he said.

Indeed, it was a visit to Egypt when Mavraganis was just 12 that ultimately changed his.

"There was this huge garbage dump, and it looked like there were ants crawling all over it But as I got closer, I realized it was people. Thousands and thousands of people -- entire families -- were living in caves they dug out," he said. "There was no sanitation, no water, and it blew me away."

Mavraganis hopes to continue teaming up with fellow nonprofit organizations to provide assistance and support to those living in parts of the world less fortunate than his own.

"I think the future is about partnering. Instead of trying to reinvent the wheel, I'm trying to set up networks of organizations that are doing really good work," he said. "I'm always trying to dig around and figure out how we can make the biggest impact."

For more information on the Cuba Aids Project, visit www.cubaaidproject.com.

To learn more about Hands of Humanity, log on to www.handsofhumanity.org