

## Connect to College (con't) [continued from page 2]

speaking skills, they will need to excel in school and be engaged members of their communities.

### Focus on the Family is Essential

While personal attention to the child is vital, a parallel intervention and focus on the child's family is absolutely essential to success. Without the involvement of the family, our work with the child could be undone at home. The family's understanding and support of the child, during the journey college graduation is a key component of the child's success.

We foster family support for the child through social services that help the parents cope with the hardships of poverty, so that their children can focus on their school work and not be distracted by hunger, illness, homelessness or other similar problems. To that end, we provide our families help with accessing housing, medical care, legal aid, food, clothing, transportation, employment, and mental health services.

### Parent Groups and Interaction Reinforce the Goals of our Program

Connect to College also focuses on parent education through group meetings with the parents of all our children held at least each quarter in addition to regularly scheduled individual meetings with the parents. An important part of this aspect of Connect to College is the parent leadership component in which parent leaders develop and help to present classes to the mothers and fathers of the children in our program. Topics include, among many others, introductions to the college experience, how to help their children with their homework, how to develop positive relationships with their children's teachers and school, financial literacy, college financial aid, parenting, child development, health concerns, mental health, legal rights, and community resources. We have also had psychologists conduct classes for parents in which the parents have shared some of their struggles and this has contributed to the sense of community among the parents of our children.

In addition, Connect to College offers a Parent Book Club in which the parents read the books in Spanish that their children are reading in school in English. The parents can then model reading for their children and discuss the assigned books with them.

Our parents develop a sense of community and common purpose. Many of them volunteered to help with the construction of our Whole Earth Building (our beautiful new headquarters and environmental education center). At a Connect to College parent meeting, our parents suggested that Uncommon Good expand its urban farming efforts by starting income producing farms in the yards of their homes. As a result, we now have fifteen income producing farms at the homes of our children and ten more awaiting development. Through Uncommon Good's "Fiddleneck Family Farms" program, unemployed immigrants with farming expertise (whose children are in our Connect to College program) are employed and paid living wages raising pesticide-free and chemical-free fruits and vegetables. Any unsold produce is distributed directly to poor families who otherwise could not afford to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables.

### Our 100% Success Will Continue

Since Connect to College began in 2004, over 1,000 students have entered our program, none have dropped out of high school, and all high school seniors have gone to college. In fact, while most of our students are now working toward high school graduation and college admittance, over 60 of our students have already graduated from high school and are now attending prestigious public and private universities throughout the country such as UCLA, Grinnell College, Pratt, Lewis & Clark, San Jose State, UC Berkeley, Duke, Oregon, and Boston College. They are studying challenging majors such as pre-med, computer science and engineering. Several of our children have graduated from college. Well in excess of \$1.5 million in scholarship money has been awarded to our graduates over the past five years.

With our comprehensive, all-encompassing approach, we are confident that all our children will continue to graduate from high school, gain a college education, and become self-reliant, thereby breaking the cycle of poverty for their families. 📧

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# UNCOMMON GOOD

FOSTERING IDEALISM in EDUCATION, MEDICINE and the ENVIRONMENT

FALL 2013 ■ VOLUME 10 ■ NUMBER 2

## Justice Personified: Timothy Dillon

### A Profile of the Chair of the Uncommon Good Board of Directors

His most famous client was Cary Grant. The richest were billionaires and huge corporations. The poorest were indigent families in falling down urban slums. The most exotic was the territory of American Samoa. The littlest was the size and weight of a single can of soup. I'd be willing to wager that Timothy Patrick Dillon has the most diverse roster of clients of any lawyer in the world. But early on, no one could have predicted such an extraordinary future for the quiet lad, the fifth of six children, from a working class neighborhood in Buffalo.

"What was it in you that made you want to be a lawyer?" I asked him.

"Well, when I was a kid, I stuttered," he explained. "When I'd try to talk, one of my brothers would slug me and say, 'Think before you speak!' I got tired of being hit and so I just stopped talking. For years I didn't say anything. But I think that experience is what made me want to be a voice for other people who couldn't speak for themselves."

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Timothy Dillon, Uncommon Good Board of Directors Chair, with schoolchildren in the mountains of Bhutan, the nation that first defined the concept of Gross National Happiness.

## Extraordinary

This past summer I received one of the most extraordinary letters of my life. It read:

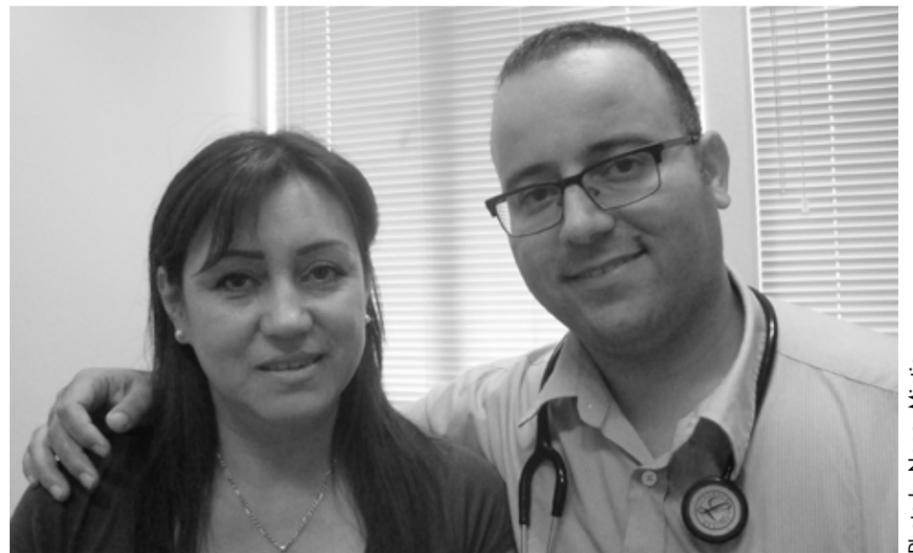


Dear Nancy,  
My eldest daughter just graduated from Haverford in the spring. During her college application process I was struck by the tremendous financial resources we "applied" to her application process. I vowed that I would create a match - that is give an equal amount spent on our own daughter to help other high school students complete the application process to elite colleges. I have never found the right spot to make the match - but this morning, reading your newsletter, I knew I could trust you to use the funds thoughtfully and effectively.

Warm regards across the miles -

As I read the letter with trembling hands, a check for \$20,000 fell out of the page into my lap. It felt in that moment as if something of great significance had shifted in our world. I had never before experienced someone equating the well-being of her own child with that of an at-risk child in our program, and then acting so concretely to remedy the disparity in their fortunes. Suddenly it felt as if anything were possible. If one person could grasp the fact of the essential connection between the well-being of all human beings, then others could follow her example. If a critical mass could come to understand this connection, we will have discovered Shangri-la, Shambhala, paradise, heaven on earth. ■

## From Hell to Healing: Dr. Chahbouni's Story



A patient of the Harbor Community Clinic, with the clinic's Medical Director, Dr. Amine Chahbouni, a participant in Uncommon Good's MED Relief program.

**Uncommon Good celebrates two generous grants to its MED Relief program from the Robert C. Fraser Fund of the California Community Foundation and The California Wellness Foundation, with this profile of one of its inspiring MED Relief doctors.**

I've learned two things living in southern California. The first is that the funkier the Mexican restaurant, the better the food. The second is that stories are like Mexican restaurants: the poorer the setting, the richer the tale. A recent fall day was no exception. I was driving through San Pedro, a southern California port city aptly named by early Spanish settlers for St. Peter [continued on page 6]



Connect to College students at a writing workshop at Pomona College.

# Connect to College

By Timothy Patrick Dillon

As Uncommon Good prepares to celebrate the 10th anniversary of its Connect to College program in 2014, the Chair of our Board of Directors, Timothy Dillon, has written this overview of the program to share with you, our generous supporters, who make our students' success possible.

## Our Children Come from Challenging Backgrounds

Since our "Connect to College" program started in 2004, we have a 100% success rate in our kids graduating from high school and their enrolling in college. This is significant because our children come from the second poorest school district in California (measured by parental income); a school district in which gang and criminal activity not only infects their neighborhoods, but begins inside the grade schools. Often no English is spoken in the home and many of our children have illiterate parents. Also, many of our children have been periodically homeless and lack the basic necessities of healthy food, medical care, transportation, and the means to have any chance to succeed in school. Not surprisingly, more than 50% of the socio-economic peers of our children drop out of high school.

We thus target the poorest and most disadvantaged students to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty by equipping them to succeed in school, graduate from college, and be happy, engaged, and productive community members.

Because of our reputation for success, children and/or their parents learn of the Connect to College program through word-of-mouth and there is a waiting list of several hundred children for our program. We evaluate each candidate by looking at, among other things, their test scores and grades to discern a pattern or combination of results that bodes well for future academic achievement. We also look both for children who want to learn and have an interest in school and supportive parents who desire to see their child attend and graduate from college or are at least have an open mind to the concept.

## Our Comprehensive Program Starts in the Fourth Grade

We have found that fourth grade is the most effective time for initial intervention. Once enrolled, our children stay in the program until they graduate from high school. Presently, we have about 20-25 students in each "class" from the fourth grade through the twelfth grade. And, generally, there are about 250 children enrolled in our Connect to College program at any one time.

Based on what we know works, Connect to College is comprehensive and intense and designed to address the multiple disadvantages of our children. Upon entry to our program, each child signs a contract with Connect to College agreeing to carry out his or her part of the bargain by meeting with the mentor and tutor each week, fully participating in all aspects of Connect to College, and applying themselves in school to achieve high grades. In the fourth grade with the initiation process including the contract, we lay the foundation for the child's emotional investment in success by emphasizing that he or she will be held to the important commitments made in the contract and Uncommon Good will likewise honor its promises to provide the necessary resources.

## Each Child has a Mentor and a Tutor

Research shows that the single most powerful intervention in the life of an at-risk child is mentoring. Thus, the heart of Connect to College's program is the one-to-

one mentoring it offers its students. Each child is matched with an adult mentor who becomes the young person's friend, role model, inspiration, and guide and window to the world of success. From the fourth grade on, the mentor meets each and every week with the mentee. They engage in activities of mutual interest, have fun together, and develop a good relationship that engenders gradual, but profound transformational change in the child. He or she learns to believe in himself or herself, to understand the importance of education, and to plan for a successful and meaningful future through continued schooling. Mentors help students envision the opportunities that success in school will afford.

Each child is also assigned a tutor. The tutor meets with the child each week to focus on academics, to prepare for testing, to make sure good grades are being maintained, and to overcome any educational deficits. In contrast to the mentoring process which is fun, tutoring is serious, objective, and result oriented. Assistance with course review, extra study, and test preparation and simulation is provided in various subjects as needed throughout the nine year period the child is in our Connect to College program.

## In Addition to Mentoring and Tutoring, Further Opportunities and Assistance are Provided

As the child progresses through school, Connect to College also provides educational enrichment opportunities. These include computer classes, science camps, educational field trips, and community service. Leadership opportunities are offered through Connect to College's "Teen Green" program in which the students create and carry out projects to preserve the environment. We also provide life skills such as swimming lessons, first aid, and babysitting classes (since many of the children are responsible for the care of younger siblings while their parents work). In addition, our children participate in writing skills workshops, music lessons, arts programs, and sports. And, we offer opportunities for summer scholarships to programs at prestigious private schools and colleges. This past summer our children received scholarships for over 90 enrichment courses at well-known schools.

When our children graduate from eighth grade and before they enter high school, they must reapply to Connect to College and explain in writing why they desire to continue with Connect to College and attend and graduate from college. In addition to mentoring and tutoring through the high school years, we provide academic counseling to ensure that the students take the courses they will need to qualify for college.

Connect to College also provides a full array of college counseling, including college searches, presentations by college administrators, SAT test preparation and payment of fees, application assistance, financial aid counseling, and college essay writing classes. Early on in high school, we also organize tours of various colleges and universities so that our children have a vision of what the future holds. Later, we are involved in the college application process and assisting our families in navigating the financial aid procedures and requirements.

All through Connect to College, we are working to give our children the tools, such as writing and

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Connect to College mentor Brian McCormick with his mentee, Diego.

# A Dream Shows The Way



Photo by Carlos Carrillo

Oklahoma visitors Jace, Jessica and Pam Girouard, with one of our Whole Earth Building contractors, James Golub of United Earth Builders.

In the first week after its opening, our Whole Earth Building had visitors from every continent. An article written about the building has been published in an ecological journal in 22 countries. Somehow, through informal networks around the world, the word has gotten out about the significance of this beautiful building for the needs of humanity and our environment.

The most extraordinary story involves a woman, Pam Girouard, from Tulsa, who called me in late May. She was in Moore, Oklahoma, helping to clean up after a monster tornado had devastated that community. On May 21st, the super storm, an EF5 on the Enhanced Fujita scale, the strongest category of tornadoes measured, howled through the town, leveling schools, business and homes in its 1.3 mile wide path. At the Plaza Towers Elementary School, 75 children and staff hunkered down on the campus. The tornado pulverized the school, leaving only a few walls standing. As the stunned populace surveyed the wreckage of the town after the passage of the storm, 24 dead were found, including 9 children, 7 of whom were from the Plaza Towers school.

After describing the heartbreaking situation to me, Pam explained that her husband worked for a sandbag manufacturing company and that she had had a dream about constructing buildings with sandbags. When she mentioned the dream to her husband, he just laughed. So she forgot about it until the dream reoccurred. Thinking this odd, she mentioned it to some friends, who told her she was nuts. So she pushed it aside once more. But again the same dream reoccurred. Driven to find out why she was having this dream, she went to the internet, did an image search for sandbags and buildings, and discovered our Whole Earth Building. In great excitement, she called us and asked if we thought that our building could withstand a super tornado. "Are you kidding me?" I responded. "This building probably weighs 500 tons. No super tornado in the world could pick this building up and throw it across town!"

Pam was thrilled with this discovery. She and her children made two trips out to visit us, to tour our Whole Earth Building, and to meet with one of our contractors, James Golub, who had been one of our foremen on the project. Now she and James are collaborating on developing earthbag structures for the towns in what is known as Tornado Alley in Oklahoma, so that there will be safe places for people to shelter when the inevitable next tornado strikes. It is extremely gratifying to know that our Whole Earth Building is playing a role in ensuring the safety of vulnerable communities and school children, and we are so very grateful that Pam had the courage to follow her dream to our door. 🍀

Uncommon Good staffs its Fiddleneck Family Farm booth at the Claremont Farmers Market. Uncommon Good sells half the produce from its backyard farms to help pay its farmers, and donates the other half to hungry families.



Photo by Ardon Alger

## Justice Personified (con't) [continued from page 1]

Even though he wasn't talking, Tim plowed his energy and ambition into work, starting as a nine-year-old selling his services shoveling snow in the streets and driveways of Buffalo during the frigid winters. At age ten, he got his first official job as a paperboy for the Buffalo Evening News. He worked through high school, college and law school, becoming self-supporting by the age of eighteen by cleaning offices, truck stops and bathrooms, doing construction, and working in a cement factory. Juggling work and school, he graduated summa cum laude with a double degree in Advanced Accounting and Economics from the State University of New York at Albany. He went on to the College of William & Mary Marshall-Wythe School of Law where he distinguished himself as the Executive Editor of the school's law review, a job reserved for the most brilliant students.

Upon completing law school, Tim owed a considerable amount of money from school loans that he had taken out to supplement what he'd been earning at his after school jobs. He accepted an offer from a large corporate firm in New York, eager to learn the practice of law and to be in the middle of exciting and important issues of the day.



Photo by Ardon Alger

Tim Dillon with a ceremonial shovel of earth at the Whole Earth Building Ground Breaking Ceremony.

After a few years he joined a business and entertainment firm in Los Angeles and then went on to become a founding member of what is now Glaser Weil, an extremely successful full service law firm. There he was immersed in a glamorous life representing powerful corporate clients, movie stars, the ABC Television Network, and the MGM/United Artist studio. Some of his cases involved famous films that even I, nerd that I am, recognize, such as "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" and "Rocky." He was living the dream, earning a reputation as the toughest lawyer in town, making money, traveling around the world, and even dating Miss South America. Life was good. It was about to get better.

Tim received an invitation to join the Claremont firm of Shernoff, Bidart & Darras, the premier law firm in the country for representing people who have been cheated by their insurance companies. He turned out to have an extraordinary genius for this type of case, perhaps fueled by the opportunity to represent underdogs for the first time in his career, those "who couldn't speak for themselves," as he put it, harkening back to his own childhood experience of not being able to use his voice to defend himself. He found a special joy in this work. As he explained to me shortly after I met him:

"Representing the poor and oppressed seems to me a very dignified thing to do. I like providing them the same kind of representation that billionaires get. When you represent billionaires, it really doesn't matter to them whether they win or lose. It's just business. But when you represent poor people, their lives are divided into two parts. The first part is before they met you and the second part is after you win justice for them and it changes their lives. And I like to have work that makes a significant difference."

At the Shernoff firm, Tim began litigating groundbreaking cases. In one very dramatic instance, he represented the government of American Samoa. In the early morning hours of December 9, 1991, Hurricane Val, with 150 mile per hour winds and 50 foot waves, tore through the island. Many homes and businesses were destroyed. A thousand people were left homeless, access to electricity and clean water was lost, and chemical and diesel spills from damaged boats

contaminated the harbor and surrounding sea. The civic leaders, however, had just bought what they had thought was a first class insurance policy that would help them recover from the devastation. Yet when they tried to collect on it, the insurer told them that the policy did not actually cover damage from "wind driven water" and so it would not pay for the clean up and restoration of the island. Unbeknownst to the Samoan officials, the insurer had surreptitiously switched a key form in the policy to delete coverage of damages from "wind driven water" effectively delivering a hurricane policy that was useless to real hurricane victims. Tim sued the insurer and won a verdict of \$118 million, including the first and largest to date award of punitive damages ever won by a governmental entity in a civil lawsuit.

In another case, Tim represented 200,000 elderly life insurance holders, some of whom were ill and in their nineties, who had been paying their premiums for decades so that after their deaths there would be a source of support for their spouse or other family members who depended upon them. In an effort to avoid having to pay out these policies, the insurer raised the premiums overnight from \$300 a month to \$1200 a month. This made the policies unaffordable for the aged pensioners who were going to have to forfeit their policies and all of the hard earned money that they had invested in them over the decades. However, Tim went to battle on their behalf and established a legal precedent that insurance companies could not arbitrarily raise life insurance rates.

Perhaps Tim's most poignant case was the representation of a one pound, micro-premie baby named Siena. For four months after her birth she was in intensive care, hovering between life and death and undergoing several surgeries. So tiny she fit into the palm of her mother's hand, she was fed for the first seven months of her life by a tube inserted into her nose and down her throat into her stomach. The tube irritated her throat and became very painful. So at eight months, a different tube was inserted into Siena's stomach with an external port on her abdomen for nutrition. At this time, her parents started to try to begin feeding her by mouth. But Siena's larynx had collapsed in on itself and it was painful for her to swallow. This, combined with the trauma from the pain of the nasal feeding tube, had given the child a severe oral aversion. No one could put anything near her face without her becoming hysterical. To make matters worse, the child was projectile vomiting the nutrition that was being put into her abdominal port. As a result, she was failing to thrive. After everything else had been tried, her doctors recommended a feeding therapy that would slowly decondition Siena's painful reactions. It involved a doctor coming to the home daily to work with the child. It took three months of daily therapy before the doctor could even gently touch the child's lips with an empty spoon. But slowly progress was made. Gradually the doctor was able to introduce an empty spoon into the little girl's mouth, and after more time, a drop of liquid.

Imagine the shock of her mother, Jessica, when during the course of Siena's feeding therapy there came a call from her doctor who said that she had received a notice from the insurance company cancelling coverage of the therapy. The insurer had determined that because Siena had an abdominal port, that this was good enough to sustain her for life and she did not need to be taught to eat normally, as this was not considered "medically necessary." Shocked by this callous disregard for her little one's well-being, Jessica tried to fight for her daughter, contacting the insurance company and demanding to talk with a decision maker. Her calls and letters went unanswered. She then went through the official appeals



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Tim Dillon and Uncommon Good's Elizabeth Preciado working on the installation of the Whole Earth Building's rooftop garden.



Yvette Martinez of Senator Barbara Boxer's office, Dolores Huerta, Tim Dillon and Whole Earth Building architect Erik Peterson at the building's Grand Opening.

process and her appeal was denied. Siena's vomiting became extremely severe, occurring up to 20 times a day. Clearly, her tiny body could not continue to endure such stress and survive.

Finally Jessica was put in touch with Tim Dillon. The family couldn't afford to hire a lawyer, but Tim agreed to write a letter on her behalf. His letter was ignored. Jessica began to weep as she described to me what happened next:

"Tim got so enraged as he got more involved and learned more. He got so passionate, and wouldn't let it go. He was the only one who helped us through the hell we went through and he never asked for anything back."

Tim took the case for free, taking the fight all the way up to the Governor's office to restore the life giving therapy for the child. He won the case, of course. Today Siena is a beautiful, vivacious, healthy little girl who owes her life to her lawyer.

Yet another chapter in Tim's law career began one day when he opened the newspaper and read about a horrific tragedy. In December of 2000, a young mother, Edelmira, was on the phone with the Health Department, asking for an inspection of the dangerously substandard apartment building in which she lived with her husband, their six-year-old daughter, and their three-year-old son. Her children were by her side and her husband was in the hallway. All of a sudden, the building collapsed with a thunderous crack. Injured and blinded by the dust, Edelmira grabbed her bleeding children and tried to fight her way out of the wreckage, screaming to her husband, "My love, we're alive! We're alive!" As they reached the front of the building, they saw an arm sticking out of the rubble. From the shirt sleeve, they recognized that it was the arm of their husband and father. The children began to cry hysterically, "Mommy, Mommy, Daddy's not dead, right?" As Edelmira frantically tried to tear the wreckage off of her husband, paramedics pulled her away and took her and the children to a hospital. Later, at a Red Cross shelter, an official approached her and told her that she would have to identify her husband's body. He showed her a photograph of the corpse and she fainted.

One hundred and fourteen tenants of the building were made homeless that day and many suffered severe injuries as well. The poorest of the poor, most were day laborers or street vendors. The slumlord who owned the property callously refused their requests for help. The tenants eventually connected with the Inner City Law Center, a legal aid organization for the poor, which offered to represent them to get relocation benefits and compensation for their injuries. The Center was joined by the law firm of Latham & Watkins, which also took on the case for free.

However, the insurance companies that represented the slumlord fought back hard. They seemed to assume, because the tenants were poor, that they wouldn't have the stamina to continue the fight, or perhaps that they could be bought off cheaply. Tim saw an opportunity to help. He joined the legal team representing the tenants, offering his services free of charge, and because of his in depth knowledge about the world of insurance, was able to uncover exactly how much insurance coverage was available in the case. Playing hardball with the opposition, Tim was able to force the insurers to pay \$6.25 million to settle the case. At the end of the case I had the opportunity to ask some of the children what they would like to do with the money from the lawsuit. One eleven-year-old boy said that he would like to buy his mother a safe house. And an eight-year-old girl

announced that she wanted to do something heretofore unimaginable in all of the preceding generations of her family. She wanted to become a lawyer.

Tim then joined the Board of Directors of Inner City Law Center and led a series of cases representing tenants injured in slum housing, including one that obtained a \$6.9 million settlement, which at the time was the largest slum housing settlement in the history of Los Angeles.

Tim also served on the board of the Laguna Beach Community Clinic from 2003 to 2008. This clinic provided the only available medical care to the army of house cleaners, custodians, landscape workers, nannies and other low-income laborers who provided essential services to the wealthy beach enclave.

Recognizing Tim's extraordinary abilities, we invited him to be a founding board member of Uncommon Good. The organization had been launched in 2000 with a \$100,000 grant from Oprah Winfrey through the Oprah Angel Network. It began with programs that helped idealistic young legal aid lawyers and community clinic doctors repay their educational loans so that they could afford to work for the lowest salaries in their field representing and treating the poor. In 2004 Tim secured \$100,000 from a class action lawsuit to underwrite Uncommon Good's fledgling education program, Connect to College. This program has had remarkable success enabling the most at-risk students to succeed in school and go to college. (For a fuller description of this program, see the accompanying article written by Tim in this newsletter.)



Maria Rodriguez, the Connect to College parent who first proposed Uncommon Good's Fiddleneck Family Farms, with Tim Dillon.

Uncommon Good's first home had been a 100 year old convent on the grounds of Our Lady of the Assumption Church in Claremont. However, the building was dilapidated and unsafe and the church needed to make other plans for the location. A child from Uncommon Good's education program mentioned that she had learned about a local architect who was promoting building earthen buildings using little more than on-site soil. We seized upon this idea as a way of demonstrating a radically green way of building that was in complete harmony with the earth, and that would conserve resources so that there could be enough to share with all. Yet because this idea was being promoted by us, a grass roots nonprofit organization, and the children that we served, we were considered misguided fools by some of the community's leaders. Furthermore, every foundation to whom we appealed for a capital grant spurned us. Yet Tim grasped the significance of what we were trying to do. He located a fund that had been set up from a class action lawsuit that was designed to promote projects that improved air quality in California. We made the argument that 40% of the power, and 70% of the electricity used in this country is used by buildings, and the production of this power causes air pollution. So if we could construct a building using only solar and human power, and that functioned as a carbon sink, we could demonstrate the linkage between the built environment and air quality, and show the way forward for a more sustainable way to erect buildings. Tim used his considerable influence to get our grant proposal a hearing, and ultimately to pave the way for its approval. Not content with an armchair role in the process, Tim turned out on our volunteer build days to lend his own physical labor to the creation of the structure. Our resulting Whole Earth Building has drawn visitors from every continent and has been publicized all over the world. Informally, we call it "the House that Tim Built" in recognition of the essential role that he played to secure its funding.

It is no exaggeration to say that Uncommon Good owes its continued existence, and the success of many of its programs, to our great champion, Tim Dillon. Together we continue the quest to create communities that meet the needs of all - humans, animals, plants, and ecosystems - that inhabit our exquisite earth. ■

From Hell to Healing (con't) *[continued from page 1]*

Photo by Nancy Mintie

Dr. Amine Chahbouni with the staff of the Harbor Community Clinic.

“...Amine would get up at 2 a.m. to stuff and fold the papers and then drive the route to deliver them. From there Amine would go on to high school. ‘That schedule was good preparation for me to be a doctor,’ he observed pragmatically.”

the fisherman. After a few miles the soaring seabirds, shimmering coastline and extravagant homes gave way in the interior of the city to an eclectically junky commercial thoroughfare. I passed a 99 Cent Store, turned right at Yum Yum Donuts and came upon a makeshift sidewalk shrine of candles and plastic flowers for some poor soul who met his untimely end there. Next to a sad little café with graffiti on its faded sign, stood a small, plain Jane gray building. Inside, on plastic chairs, sat a young man with a flamboyant splash of tattoos running up both arms, an elderly gentleman with bowed head and shoulders in a threadbare coat, and women of assorted ages and sizes, some with toddlers in tow. I had arrived at the Harbor Community Clinic, the professional home of Dr. Amine Chahbouni. How he got there is the story, one that goes all the way around the world and back.

Amine was born in the United States to North African parents and lived the early years of his childhood in Los Angeles while his father studied at the University of Southern California. After his father graduated, he was obliged to return with his family to his native Algeria to serve the Algerian government since it had paid for his education. Little Amine was six-years-old at the time and remembers being panicked by this news. “No more Disneyland! No more toys!” he

thought in shock.

It was even more of a shock when the family arrived in the parents’ stark home town of Ghardaia in the Sahara Desert, remote and one of the hottest places on earth.

“I had to learn French and Arabic and I promptly forgot all my English since it was of no use to me there,” Amine recalls.

As the family settled in and Amine began learning the languages and culture of his new home, portentous clouds were forming on the political horizon. The now depressingly familiar story of fundamentalist extremists clashing with corrupt secular governments began to play out in Algeria. Tensions came to a head when the military staged a coup in 1992 to prevent the Islamic Salvation Front from winning what would have been the country’s first democratic elections. The resulting “dirty war” left 200,000 dead and over 15,000 forcibly disappeared.

The Algerian government engaged in torture and indefinite imprisonment of suspects without charges or trial. Initially guerillas targeted the army and police but then started killing civilians whom they suspected of being sympathetic to the government or who would not abide by strict religious prohibitions, such as women who did not veil themselves. Over 70 journalists were murdered, by both government and rebel forces. Other victims included artists, teachers, civil servants and even sports figures. The murders escalated into massacres of intense brutality, during which hundreds of townspeople at a time were killed, sometimes within a few hundred yards of army barracks while the troops inexplicably stood by and did nothing to help the villagers. Schools were burned and airports were bombed.

As the country imploded in violence, Amine’s father was especially at risk because he was an intellectual and worked as an engineer for the government. Then, as Amine turned seventeen, he and his family knew that in a year’s time he would be drafted forcibly by the government into the hellish civil war. So the family, which by this time included three daughters, left everything behind and fled the country. They made their way to the United States, landing penniless back in Los Angeles. Their new life of bitter poverty was radically different than the life they remembered living in Los Angeles eleven years earlier.

Amine’s father got a job delivering newspapers. He and Amine would get up at 2 a.m. to stuff and fold the papers and then drive the route to deliver them. From there Amine would go on to high school. “That schedule was good preparation for me to be a doctor,” he observed pragmatically.

During those years the family's income barely covered rent and food. There was no money left over for medical care and one of the daughters suffered from life-threatening asthma. Mercifully, the family discovered a free clinic in downtown Los Angeles that provided her with the care she needed to survive. This was Amine's first encounter with community medicine and it planted the seed that would blossom a few years later.

Despite having to relearn English, Amine proved to be a brilliant student who, upon graduating from high school, was accepted into the University of California at Irvine. There his interest in serving others grew and he volunteered with the Flying Samaritans, a group that travels to destitute areas to provide healthcare. He went with the Samaritans to the Mexican border town of El Tererazo where he began learning Spanish which would become his fourth language. Back at the university, he joined Latino pre-med groups because he realized that in this region the largest group of underprivileged people was the immigrants from Mexico and Central America. He wanted to learn more about their cultures and master their language so that he could be of service to them.

Upon graduation, Amine supported himself and his parents by doing medical research for a company that was attempting to find a cure for diabetes. After a few years he realized that he was at a crossroads. He could either advance in the research field by getting his Ph.D. or he could follow his original dream of becoming a community doctor for the poor. Fortunately for the future patients of the Harbor Community Clinic, he decided to become a physician.

He chose Western University of Health Sciences in Pomona because it was close to his parents, whom he continued to support. He also was drawn to the school's patient-centered, holistic approach to the practice of medicine. "They believe that healing is not just medication, but also the human touch," he explained. The emphasis on a compassionate practice of medicine was not just a philosophical issue for Amine. For he had gotten married while in medical school, and he and his wife had a son who was born with congenital heart disease and required 3 surgeries, starting in his infancy. "I've learned from being a patient how to be a better doctor," Amine confided.

During medical school, despite his family cares and heavy academic load, Amine took time to provide free health care to low-income residents of Pomona

and Montclair through a student run clinic and the Pomona Community Health Action Team.

When he graduated, he turned his back on the big bucks, despite owing over \$270,000 in educational loans, and accepted a job as the Medical Director of the Harbor Community Clinic. The clinic offers free health care to those who have no insurance and no money to pay for care. Even with the advent of the Affordable Care Act, thousands of residents of Los Angeles County will not have access to healthcare and will continue to depend upon clinics such as Amine's. Many of them are immigrants with traumatic personal stories. Amine shares his own journey with them to inspire and encourage them.

Jobs at community clinics cannot pay enough to enable a doctor to provide for a family and also to repay huge educational loans, to say nothing of also supporting elderly parents as Amine does. Fortunately, Uncommon Good's Medical Education Debt Relief (MED Relief) program is here to help with loan repayment assistance for Amine and other dedicated community clinic doctors. Uncommon Good is particularly grateful for two recent exceptionally generous donations to the program. This fall, the Robert C. Fraser Fund of the California Community Foundation committed \$192,196 and The California Wellness Foundation donated \$100,000 to MED Relief.

With the help of MED Relief, Amine is able to follow his heart to be a doctor for those who need him most. The loving kindness which he brings to his practice sets the tone at his clinic. Even though he and his staff deal with a suffering and desperate clientele, the mood there is a friendly and happy one. Amine's staffers, to his face, call him "Dr. C." But I was told that behind his back they call him "Dr. Charlie" and themselves "Charlie's Angels." They may be on to something. Their smiles, laughter and obvious concern for each other and their patients turn what could be a dreary, sad environment into something angelic.

During my visit, a middle aged woman came by the clinic. Amine lit up when he saw her. "She's my favorite patient!" he exclaimed. "Why?" I asked. "When she first came to me she had a herniated disk, was in horrible pain, and could only walk with crutches and a walker. I was able to heal her and now she's not only walking again, but dancing, too. I love that!"

Oh, Amine, we love it, too. 📌



Photo by Nancy Mintie

Dr. Chahbouni with his favorite patient.