

Only kindness MATTERS

He was the self-made man who made it to the top of the corporate tree. It is his work as a philanthropist, however, that has won him respect and an Australian of the Year award. KAREN HARDING speaks to the Man Who Gave It All Away.

By the time he was 40, Philip Wollen had the corporate world at his feet.

A merchant banker, he was Vice-President of Citibank at 34 and a general manager at Citicorp. He was named one of the top 40 headhunted executives in Australia by Australian Business Magazine. He had the material trappings of a successful executive and his favourite meal was filet mignon and lobster.

It seemed his story was complete. From a youngster in Bangalore, to the diligent student who travelled to Australia alone and naive at age 18 to further his education, to the top of the heap. He had worked hard to make something of himself, and he had succeeded.

But deep within him, something was stirring.

“I think I discovered early on that a man doesn’t find his character on Wall Street. It lives on the road to Damascus.”

One day a client took him to one of his businesses, an abattoir. What he witnessed that day shocked him to the core and changed his path forever.

The man he had striven so hard to be had come face to face with the man he would become. The story was not concluded at all. A new chapter was beginning.

Fast forward some years and Wollen stands astride the world again. But this time it is through the footprints of the Winsome Constance Kindness Trust.



The trust, named after his mother and grandmother, is dedicated to supporting groups that actively work in areas that are in alignment with the Trust’s Five Fingers – Children, Animals, The Ill, The Environment and Aspiring Youth.

The breadth, scale and diversity of the Trust are impressive. It currently supports 400 projects in 40 different countries, with its goal 100 countries by 2020.

Unlike other philanthropic organisations, it supports both human and non-human causes. For Wollen, anthropocentrism - the idea that man is of central importance in his own universe - is abhorrent.

“I honestly believe it is the ultimate sin. If Moses could have spelled it, he would have put it in the top ten. He just couldn’t spell it.”



What is central in Wollen’s world is the concept of “ahimsa”, an ancient Sanskrit term meaning ‘non-violence to any living being’. Adhering to this means accepting that man is at one with those living beings with which he shares the planet, and shouldering responsibility for their welfare.

One of the core beliefs of the trust is that “in their capacity to feel pain and fear, a pig is a dog is a bear is a boy.”

Accordingly, Wollen’s Trust divides its benevolence between programs designed to aid humans, animals and those that recognise their mutual relationship.

Amongst its many projects throughout the world, it has constructed schools and orphanages, rescued bears, dogs and gibbons, built lion parks and a sanctuary for unwanted farm animals, instituted vaccination programs and supported programs in the arts, science and sporting areas. And in doing so it has endeavoured not just to fix things for now but to educate for the future.

A major innovation of the Trust is Kindness House, a multi-million dollar project in inner city Fitzroy in

Melbourne. Home to 21 groups at any one time, and with a current waiting list of 16, the massive building offers up-to-the minute technology and office facilities to its tenants at a highly subsidised rent.

“We basically take small non-Government organisations (NGOs) and turn them into big ones. That’s our plan. We tell everyone who comes in, we want you to grow and become big and successful and do good things.”

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Residents past and present of the Kindness campus include Wildlife Victoria, The Brotherhood of St Laurence STEP program, Greenpeace, The Torch Program (outreach to the aboriginal community through theatre), Triathlon Victoria, Rescued With Love (adoption program for small dogs), Artists for Kids Culture, Social Firms Australia (creating employment options for those with psychiatric disability), Edgar’s Mission and Environment East Gippsland.

Above: Former US Vice President and environmental campaigner Al Gore met with Philip and Karen Wollen during his Australian visit. Inset: The Wollens at the SOS Wildlife Bear Rescue Centre in Agra, India.



Left to right: School for disabled children, Animal Rescue Centre - Chennai, South Australian Children's Ballet, Edgar's Mission, Kilmore - Victoria, Morning Star Orphanage - Bangalore, With former Victorian police chief Christine Nixon

When Wollen first founded the Trust, he was able to perform his philanthropic giving behind its name, without accolade or public scrutiny.

“We were seeking nothing for ourselves. All we wanted was anonymity.”

This he had - until his work started getting attention.

In 2005 he received the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM). The following year Altruism Australia bestowed upon him their Australian Humanitarian Award (Charity Category). And in 2007 he was awarded Australian of the Year Victoria by the National Australia Day Council.

Essentially a private man, Wollen had to think long and hard before accepting. Being thrust into the limelight was a two-edged sword. On one side it directed attention to the many worthy causes he supported and to his ideals; on the other, it brought him up against some powerful enemies.

He sought counsel in the way he always does.

“Whenever I face a moral dilemma, I close my eyes and look into the cage where there is a tortured bear and I can see the tragedy and the sadness in those eyes and I ask them...what would you have me do? And the answer is always the same. Whatever it takes, just get me out of here, get them to stop.

“If it means making myself a bigger target for these cruel, boorish people who say it’s only an animal, then so be it.”

“I decided to give away everything I had with warm hands and die broke, and so far I’m right on budget.”

Wollen’s strong and outspoken stance against livestock-for-food industries, both for their cruelty to animals and their impact on the environment and climate change, has brought him everything from contempt to death threats. But he is unmoved. He sees them as the greatest foe to the sustainability of the planet and its inhabitants.

The second greatest is time.

He believes Governments and corporations can work together to effect necessary change but that the main thrust will come from the man and woman in the street.

“The day we say we want it, it’ll happen....I believe that day will come but I don’t know whether it will come in time. If we had an infinite amount of time ahead of us as a species, I would say yes, it will have to. But we don’t have that length of time.

The oceans are dying in our time. In 20, 40 years time all our fisheries will be dead and they are lungs and arteries of the planet. The livestock industry grows food for animals, the most inefficient energy transfer system you could possibly imagine. It takes up to 50,000 litres of water to produce 1 kilogram of beef compared to only 2500 litres of water to produce 1 kg of white rice, and even less for most fruit and vegetables.”

Much in demand for speaking engagements, Wollen continually hammers the point home that saving the planet is in the hands of those who live on it, as well as those who govern it.

“In all my speeches I have a standard line. Everyone in this audience wants to change the world as long as they don’t have to change themselves, and life doesn’t work that way. First we change, and the world follows.”

For all his apparent strength, there are times when Wollen himself needs support. Days when he says he has to, in the words of Shakespeare, “stiffen up the sinews and summon up the blood” just to get through. Nights when he wakes screaming, haunted by the terrible images he has seen.

He copes, he thinks, because of his wife Trix. “I don’t think I would have done what I did (without her). I’ve always been comforted knowing that I have a very soft place to fall, and I fall a lot.”

Trix Wollen, for her part, acknowledges that she is strong when her husband has his bad days, says she falls in a heap when he’s good, but loves what they do, despite its challenges. Team Wollen is both formidable and compassionate, and an inspiration to many.

Asked who inspires him, he initially says he doesn’t believe in heroes, just ordinary people who do extraordinary things, such as the man who went to rescue a cow being brutally attacked in Zimbabwe and was also killed by the mob. Or the man who went into a Muslim slaughterhouse to rail against the brutality and was stabbed for his trouble. The Wollens paid for his hospitalisation.

He then nominates Paul Watson from Sea Shepherd before adding that “at the risk of sounding corny, the people I’ve most found inspiring are always low-key and in my experience have been women. I think my mother, my grandmother, Trix, Maneka (Gandhi), Jill (Robinson, of Animals Asia).....”

Wollen’s personal transformation since those terrible moments in the abattoir has undergone many phases, each connected to or an extension of each other. He began by immediately giving up eating meat then extended that to becoming vegan (and has never felt better.) He started ‘tithing’ – giving away 10% of his income. Then one year he decided to give away 90% and see if he could survive. And indeed he could. From there it seemed but a short step to larger scale philanthropy.

“I decided to give away everything I had with warm hands and die broke, and so far I’m right on budget.”

The businessman in him has not disappeared, however, far from it. He lends his skills, experience and acumen to the organisations and groups he fosters and takes pleasure in their growth.

“I am still fairly ambitious; it’s just that the goal posts have changed.”

He prefers not to see himself as giving his money away but, rather, as re-investing it. One of his favourite quotes is that of Gertrude Stein: “The money stays the same; it’s only the pockets that change.”

Wollen is a mix of apparent contrasts. He is a private man with a public profile. He lives a simple life yet tackles complex issues. He sees the small details but focuses on the big picture.

To the captains and kings of society he gives speeches which champion the disadvantaged, the marginalised and the mistreated. He is strong when he has to be and soft when he can be. He has worked with some of the biggest companies in the world yet now seeks to nurture grass roots organisations.

He draws on some of the great thinkers of human history yet is modern and strategic in his own thoughts. He has been called radical but considers himself conservative. “What is more radical than killing?” He says he has an apocalyptic view of the future yet his actions radiate hope.

In a world where strength is measured by brutality, debate is centred on the winner of the latest reality TV show and role models are determined by celebrity, Philip Wollen is a revelation.

He may not believe in heroes but to every child, adult or animal that has felt his ministering hand, he is indeed theirs.

He intends to leave nothing behind but he will. His example. ■

The Winsome Constance Kindness Trust is a philanthropic organisation and as such does not accept donations. For causes fully recommended by the Wollens or for more information on their projects and Kindness House go to www.kindnesstrust.com

THE WORD ON WOLLEN

- Phil is not just a person who puts his money where his mouth is; he puts his energy and his very life force, where his heart is, and he does it so strategically....I suspect his particular breed of Phil-anthropy is unrivalled in its long term effect.”
Nichola Donovan, Lawyers For Animals
- Philip Wollen not only saves lives, he changes them. I know. I am one he changed. He truly does as Gandhi said, “Be the change you want to see”.
Kae Norman, Rescued With Love
- He makes us believe that one person can change the world if he has the goodness and courage to do it. Thousands owe their lives and well being to him.
Maneka Gandhi, MP, New Delhi
- I am honoured, inspired and proud to call him friend.
Pam Ahern, Edgar’s Mission Farm Sanctuary
- Phil is a guiding light; he illuminates the darkness to remind us all of the better side of human nature. Phil is the Gandhi of Fitzroy!
Alex Marr, The Wilderness Society
- Probably the most remarkable individual I have had the pleasure to know, judging by the change he has made in so many lives.
S. Chinny Krishna, Blue Cross of India
- There’s something that just emanates with love, this generosity. He’s just amazing, a beautiful man.
Beverley Waters, South Australian Children’s Ballet
- His work ethic, his dedication and his vision certainly do rub off on everyone with whom he comes in contact. Phil has been amazing for us.
Mark Donneddu, Vegetarian Network
- He could have made heaps and heaps by pursuing a business career but instead he chose to put all his time into bringing about peace between the kingdoms of nature, and opted for continuous use of an old and well-worn coat.
Christine Townend, Help in Suffering, Jaipur India