

# 20 years, thousands of kids saved

In 1989, Dr. Nilas Young and Heart to Heart embarked on an urgent mission to the Soviet Union. They carried skills, hope – and a bold demand.

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**H**e boarded that midnight train from Moscow, not knowing what lay ahead once he arrived in Leningrad.

This was 1989, the crescendo of the Cold War, and the glasnost (openness) door was open only a crack in the Soviet Union. Wide enough, however, for Dr. Nilas Young and doctors from a nascent Northern California humanitarian group, Heart to Heart, to embark on a mission to save children with heart defects.

On that eight-hour trip, Young and his party had time to absorb the vertiginous series of events that led them there.

The only reason they gained entrance to Moscow was a highly publicized, lifesaving heart surgery Young had performed six months earlier on a 7-year-old Russian girl flown to the Bay Area by an American philanthropist. That led to a slew of letters – one addressed on a used flour sack, sealed with wax – from Soviet parents asking Young for help. And that led to a meeting in Moscow with the Soviet health minister, who told them 50,000 children a year were born with heart defects and only about 200 were repaired – and then, only in Moscow.

Go to Leningrad, the health minister implored, and help. Go save kids whose fingers were turning blue from lack of oxygen due to congenital heart defects, who couldn't run down a hospital corridor without hunching over to try to increase blood flow. Go provide equipment and training where none existed.

But before leaving on that train to Leningrad (the city would not be called St. Petersburg again until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991), Young, now chief of cardiac surgery at UC Davis Medical Center, had one demand of his own.

It was something that, 20 years and thousands of surgeries later, still separates Heart to Heart from many humanitarian medical organizations who arrive in needy countries for a few weeks, perform surgeries, then leave.

That request, gutsy given the still-chilly political climate and cultivated distrust of Americans: That the doctors and hospitals

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Above, Hector Amezcua/hamezcua@sacbee.com; left, courtesy of Nilas Young  
**Dr. Nilas Young** at his UC Davis Medical Center office, above.  
At left, the crumbling St. Petersburg Hospital No. 1 in 1990.

**Heart to Heart**, founded in 1989, is a nonprofit international children's medical alliance based in Oakland. Its funding comes from private donations and corporate grants, such as from Alcoa and Medtronic.

■ The organization says Russian and American doctors have teamed to save 7,000 children with heart defects in the former Soviet Union.

■ For more information and to donate:  
www.heart-2-heart.org or (510) 839-4280



# Heart: Doctors worked with decades-old technology

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in St. Petersburg would eventually be given the training, infrastructure and financial resources by the Soviets to perform pediatric cardiac surgery without Heart to Heart's oversight.

"When I was in surgery training in San Francisco (in the 1960s), one of my mentors worked at Project Hope," says Young. "He'd go to South America to small villages and operate on patients. He told me the frustrating thing was, you'd go back every year and nothing ever seemed to change. That echoed through me when we started this: 'If we're going to do this, we're going to do something lasting.'"

That, it has.

By 1998, three major hospitals in St. Petersburg were running pediatric cardiac surgery units independently. In 2003, Heart to Heart expanded its training and assistance to hospitals in the Samara region of Russia. And in 2006, it turned its attention to Tomsk on the West Siberian plains.

"Our goal in the first place was to eventually become obsolete," Young says. "The Russians have done a great job getting up to speed, and it's put more money toward medicine. It's good to see."

Forgive Young a bit of reflection. The soft-spoken 63-year-old Louisiana native, who retains an endearing Cajun accent after decades in California, has allowed himself a few moments to look back as the organization celebrated its 20th anniversary with a Valentine's Day bash in Berkeley.

"Heart to Heart has done some fine work," he says, understated as always.

To understand how much work it was, what a daunting task Young and company initially faced, you must return with Young on that overnight train to Leningrad/St. Petersburg. At dawn's light, when they pulled into the station, a crowd of several hundred greeted them as if they were a winning sports team.

"It was surreal," he says, sitting in his office in Sacramento. "The head of the hospital was there, families



Courtesy of Dr. Nilas Young

Dr. Nilas Young, above left, instructs Russian surgeons in pediatric heart surgery in 1990. At right, a Russian intensive-care unit shown that year lacks equipment and has only a single lamp.

with kids with heart defects were there, the extended families of those kids, strangers came around to see us. But when we got to the hospital and we were ..."

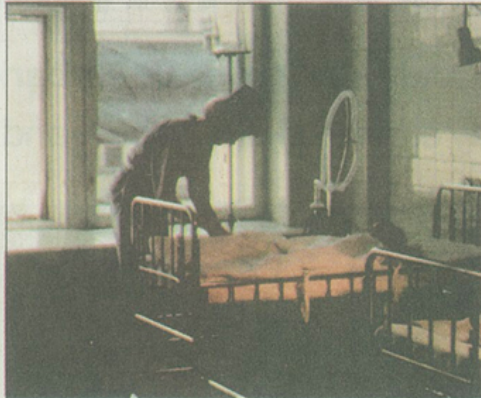
And here Young paused, thinking of the precise word. "... flabbergasted."

The hospital, only 10 years old, was crumbling from the outside, its facade chipped, its emergency room ramp nearly reduced to rubble. One major tower of the 500-bed facility had been abandoned and taken over by birds.

"I grew up in southern Louisiana," he says, "and we had some tiny little old hospitals in the 1950s that had stuff like they were using there."

He wheeled in his chair over to his computer screen to show photographic evidence of the challenge Heart to Heart faced.

*Click.* "Here's a photo of the basic equipment," he says. "Stainless-steel canisters with all the bandages in one spot, washed and reused. Porcelain trays."



*Click.*

"This is the ICU of the largest hospital in northwest Russia. There wasn't much 'intensive' about it. No equipment. No monitors. The window's open. The only light is from a gooseneck lamp in the corner."

*Click.*

"Here's the only (heart) monitor in the whole 500-bed hospital. They only had one ventilator, and the problem was it was a high-pressure ventilator that would blow children's lungs out and they'd die."

*Click.*

"These are cats used for rodent control. The cats hung out in the basement and would come out on

time Heart to Heart volunteer Lizbeth Hasse, "Dr. Young is understating it. I opened a cabinet for medical supplies and saw just one piece of suture. They'd wash and reuse it. But Dr. Young was totally dedicated from the start."

Not, Young admits, that he didn't have a few anxious thoughts.

"Your gut reaction is (no way)," he says. "But I thought we could have a huge impact. It's not like we'd be doing this on some island that won't have any resources. If we teach these people how to do it, they'd do it themselves."

Young was as impressed by the ingenuity of the Russian doctors as he was appalled by the lack of basic services.

"They asked me to do a coronary bypass using an artery they weren't used to using - a mammary artery from the chest muscle," Young recalls. "They didn't have a knife sharp enough so they gave me a broken razor blade (attached) to a clamp."

"And the way they'd detect heart defects - because they didn't have an esophageal echocardiogram - was to stick your finger in some heparin, an anticoagulant, and stick it in the heart to feel around. That is very, very old, '50s stuff for Americans."

"Everybody had the impression that, because the Russians seemed so advanced in the arms race, that they'd have sophisticated medical technology, too. It was somewhat shocking to find out they didn't."

As Russian surgeon Dr. Mark Zilberman told CBS' Lesley Stahl in a 1992 "60 Minutes" story on Heart to Heart, Soviet medical funding back then "was for communists, for high military men."

The result was that thousands of children were not living past their toddler years. Once Heart to Heart started making its training and surgery visits in 1990, the organization was forced into something of a Sophie's Choice: Which children to operate on with limited resources?

"We reviewed possible cases months ahead, and it sounds terrible but it's true

that, even though there are so many kids needing help, we have to be selective," says Josie Everett, Heart to Heart's executive director. "You've got to choose the most common cases that provide the training so that the (Russian) doctors can learn to treat the greatest number of cases after we leave."

"Year after year, they get more advanced skills so that eventually, they can treat everybody."

That scenario has come to pass in St. Petersburg. And UC Davis cardiac surgeon Dr. Gary Raff, who heads the Heart to Heart operation in Samara, says doctors are making great strides in that region.

"I was supposed to go back again (soon), but I don't think they need us too much anymore," Raff says. "They're at a point of almost self-sufficiency. I think Heart to Heart's (work) in Russia is the model for how to develop a complex health-care system over a broad area."

Siberia and the southern regions of Russia are still a work in progress. Now that Russia has a market economy, Everett says, more funds are being spent on health care and conditions at hospitals have improved. But a need still exists.

Over the years, Young has enlisted surgical help from UC San Francisco, Stanford, the Mayo Clinic and the Emory University Children's Hospital in Atlanta. He's 63 now and makes it to Russia just once a year "for site visits," leaving the surgery to his younger colleagues.

The progress, he says, is heartening.

"When we got there in 1989, they were only doing a few hundred pediatric (heart) surgeries in Moscow per year," Young says. "Now, it's a few thousand a year, nationwide, without our help. We want to become obsolete."

*Call The Bee's Sam McManis, (916) 321-1145. Read his postings on The Bee's "Health & Fitness" blog at sacbee.com/blogs.*