

Giving Something Back
By SHIRLEY ZAGOREC
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Henri Landwirth walks into the dining hall of his foundation, Give Kids the World, where terminally ill children and their families have just finished breakfast and headed out for a day of fun at Orlando-area attractions. He shakes hands with the volunteers who served the meals, thanking them for their efforts. As he moves, you can't help noticing his warm smile, his brilliant blue eyes.

And the number B4343 tattooed in blue ink on the inside of his arm.

Having survived the worst of times, he looks at every day with wonder: "I love life," he says. "I shouldn't be here — by all rights, I should have died."

Born the son of a Jewish diamond-cutter from Antwerp, Belgium, Landwirth was 13 when his family was taken away by the Nazis to Auschwitz. He never saw his parents again.

"I was in the camp for five years," says Landwirth. "I was in Auschwitz and then a camp called Mauthausen. It was one of the very worst camps. Then they sent me somewhere in Germany, near Leipzig, to an underground camp where I never saw light for a year. This camp was an anti-aircraft factory. We all got very sick with typhus. Out of 2,500 prisoners and Germans, only 300 survived."

When he was 18, two German soldiers marched him and four other Jewish prisoners from the concentration camp into the woods to be shot. Once in the woods, one soldier turned to the other and said: "The war is almost over. Why don't we just let them go?"

The other soldier agreed, so they untied the prisoners and yelled, "Run!" Whether by fate, luck or miracle, Landwirth believes his life was spared for a reason, some greater purpose. He was given a second chance at life — and he has used it well.

In 1949, a new world opened up for Landwirth. That year he found his twin sister, Margo, alive in Germany and crossed the Atlantic Ocean with \$20 in his pocket. A year later, unable to read or write English, Landwirth was drafted. Instead of being assigned to the war zone in Korea, he was sent to New Jersey, where the Army thought his skills as a diamond cutter would be useful in cutting crystals used in field radios. He finished his tour of duty and then used the G.I. Bill to study hotel management.

The ideas behind Give Kids the World grew in Landwirth's mind during the early 1980s while he was hosting terminally ill children at his hotel in Kissimmee, Fla., near Disney World. His dreamland for children materialized in 1986. Give Kids the World Village opened on 35 acres of land with 56 custom-designed villas for visiting families, a restaurant in the shape of a gingerbread house, a stocked fishing pond, a swimming pool, a playground, nature trails, an ice-cream parlor, a chapel — and its own mascot, Mr. Clayton, a five-foot gray rabbit with a top hat, who greets the kids and tucks them in at night.

The village provides free housing, food, transportation and attraction tickets to more than 300 families a month — more than 4,000 each year. Volunteerism is the heart of all this. Most of the staff is selected each week from about 1,200 names on the village's volunteer database: 500 people each week.

"My life is a miracle," Landwirth says. "I feel it is my duty to give something back. You have got to give of yourself — not money but the essence of yourself. That is what makes life meaningful."

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