

LOCAL FOCUS

Newport Resident and Rotary Club Create the Cleft Project

By CAROLINE LEEDOM | NB INDY

Several years ago, while in Mexico on a humanitarian mission, Newport Beach resident Steve Bender saw a group of children throwing rocks at a little boy.

He told them to stop, but when he walked back a few minutes later, he noticed the kids were still throwing rocks. This time that little boy was crying.

Bender noticed he had a cleft palate and was very dirty from being pushed around.

Bender remembers, "He had the saddest empty eyes. I will never forget the way he looked at me, as if to say 'What did I do to deserve this?' I told the boys to take me to their mother. One of the boys told me, 'It's ok. He is my brother.'"

Bender realized that this poor boy was the outcast of the neighborhood, and his family.

It was at this moment that Bender decided to do something about it. From this encounter, The Cleft Project was born.

Fondly described by friends as a "One Man Hurricane," Bender is an energetic man who seems to spread good wherever he goes.

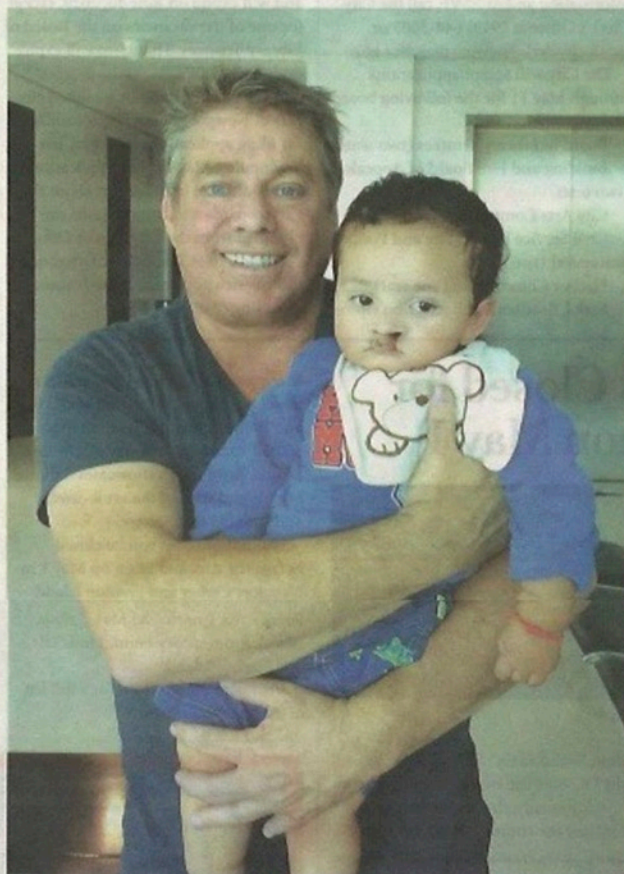
"Philanthropy is my golf," Bender said.

He is a visionary who just wants to make the world a better place.

Bender sits on six nonprofit boards and has founded many philanthropic projects, among them Doc in a Box, which helps facilitate dental, vision and literacy to the underserved.

Bender is also President of the Newport Beach Sunrise Rotary Club. He presented his vision for The Cleft Project to the club in 2014 and the club enthusiastically got behind the project.

The Cleft Project's mission is to find a child in need of cleft palate surgery and, in essence, "adopt" the entire family and community. In addition to the child receiving surgery, the organization provides clothing, toys and supplies.



Steve Bender with Mexican patient Christopher Morales

The goal of the project is for the child to become the champion of the community, instead of being an outcast, where he or she can finally lead a normal life free from torment.

Bender wanted Mexico to be the first recipient country in honor of the little boy Bender came across on his humanitarian mission several years ago.

According to a study completed in 2009 and published in the *Annals of*

Pediatrics, on average, within Mexico, there are 1,510 yearly cases of cleft lip, with a 32 percent incidence rate higher in boys than in girls.

In Mexico, cleft lip occupies the first place among all genetic malformations.

The cause for cleft lip/palate is multifactorial - considering genetic and environmental variables - and the most frequent are facial conditions, with an incidence of around one in every 800 children.

Bender had knowledge of a clinic located just south of the boarder in Tijuana called Cosmed at VIDA, owned by the Quiroz family. Dr. Alejandro Quiroz, who used to have a cosmetic surgery practice located in Corona del Mar, was aware of Bender's work through another nonprofit, Doc in a Box.

Dr. Quiroz had expressed to Bender his family's desire to help Doc in a Box on future projects in any way they could. Bender had always been attracted to their passion to give back to the community.

He approached Dr. Quiroz and his wife Lisette, as well as their son, Alejandro Quiroz, Jr. (then marketing director of Cosmed at VIDA), about working with the Cleft Project. The family wholeheartedly agreed.

Soon after, The Cleft Project, along with Bender's Newport Beach Sunrise Rotary, officially partnered with the two Rotary clubs in Rosarito: Mexico-Rotario of Rosarito and Playas de Rosarito Rotary Club.

Now, with three Rotary clubs behind them as well as the clinic, Cosmed at VIDA, the Cleft Project was able to move forward with picking the most difficult cleft lip case they could find and turn the child's life around through surgery.

Rolando Quintero, the project manager on The Cleft Project and member of the Rotary of Rosarito, sought out their first recipient in a very simple way—by placing an announcement in the local newspaper.

Multiple families responded and their first recipient was chosen: Christopher Morales, a one-year-old boy, born in April of 2013 with a cleft lip and some malformations in his hands.

He was chosen based on his age and the level of difficulty of his case. Christopher would need at least three surgical interventions within his lifetime to fix his cleft lip.

After months of preparation, Christopher underwent his first surgical intervention on July 14, 2014.

The surgery was performed by Dr. Alicia Sigler, a graduate of La Salle University, and Dr. Carlos Castaneda, a graduate of Universidad Autonoma de Baja California. It was a success and Christopher went on to complete his second surgery on December 11, 2015, less than a year and a half later, with the same two surgeons. Christopher is expected to have at least one more surgery to fix his cleft lip.

It's a smooth running machine between all parties. Bender offers continued vision, coordination and recruitment. Rotario Rosarito coordinates the patient's checkups and procedures, in addition to offering support to the patient's entire family, while the team at Cosmed at VIDA cover the surgery (and if needed, multiple surgeries) - for free.

Bender is proud of the fact that he has enabled three Rotary clubs in two countries (Newport Beach Sunrise, Rotario of Rosarito and Playas de Rosarito Rotario) to work together on The Cleft Project.

His goal is to expand the program to other Rotary clubs and regions around the world. The Cleft Project is currently working on a program to help a child in need of cleft palate surgery within Peru next year.

"With everything we do, we want to show that this works and have other clubs adopt the program," says Bender.

Christopher is too young to be aware of many of the hardships he bypassed in life because of this opportunity—and that's fine with Bender and his team at The Cleft Project.

All they care about is that Christopher and children like him never stop smiling.

For more information, visit thecleftproject.org.

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