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5 Humble Humanitarian Heroes

You don't need to be a celebrity to make a big impact.

By [Oliver Lee](#)

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You don't need to be Angelina Jolie or Bono to be a great humanitarian.

Nothing against celebri-tarians, of course. It can't be easy galavanting across the globe, giving speeches for good causes, paparazzi pouncing every time you [hug a malnourished Sudanese child](#). Quite the opposite.

These humanitarians, however, are cut from a different cloth. And since it's World Humanitarian Day, it seems appropriate to take a step back to honor the do-gooders that don't have -- or even want -- the news headlines, photo-ops, and dizzying glitz of PR machines.

Here's a look at our five favorite humble heroes, who have helped hundreds of thousands during their long careers as humanitarians.

HOWARD HARPER

Born in 1930, Howard Harper left his native New Zealand at 23 to pursue medicine and ended up practicing in the unlikeliest of places -- Afghanistan.

"I felt called to go to central Asia," said Harper. "At this point there were few openings, as the Russians had occupied most of central Asia, and the Chinese had taken over Xinjiang. The only open part was Afghanistan and northern Pakistan."

After opening the Noor Eye Hospital at Darulaman in Kabul in 1966, the young eye doctor established himself as a permanent fixture in the city, raising a daughter there with his wife, Monika, while helping thousands of people see again who couldn't otherwise afford it.

"We would start operating at 3 in the morning. It was too hot in the daytime—the temperature would be well over 100°F...We stopped for breakfast at 9, having done 100 operations, and then saw about 400 more before lunch and a nap. It was hard work but also a joy to see a patient who has been blind for years suddenly see loved ones again."

Now getting treatment in the U.K. for cancer, the 81-year-old has set up hospitals across Central Asia and plans to return to work once he's beat the disease.

"...While other people may want to stop at age 60 or 65, I feel as long as you're in good nick and your mind is working, your hands are able and you can think straight, there is no reason not to go on longer. I take this a year at a time. I might not have much money, but I've had a very rich life."

Give to Harper's U.K. charity Vision International [here](#).

JARED GENSER

In 1998 Jared Genser was a mere law student when he happened to read about the case of James Mawdsley, a British human rights activist who had been sentenced to 17 years in solitary confinement in Burma for distributing prodemocracy pamphlets.

Genser, who had worked on a human rights case during his summer internship, was immediately interested. Though just in his second year, he filed a brief with the United Nations, took the case to Capitol Hill and eventually got 23 lawmakers to sign a letter urging Mawdsley's release, putting enough political pressure on the Burmese military dictatorship to get Mawdsley's release.



Mawdsley's first words to Genser? "Thanks, you saved my life." (Photo: Kennedy School Bulletin)

"For me everything clicked at that moment," Genser said. "I didn't really fathom what being a human rights lawyer meant other than helping people in tough circumstances. But that's an abstract concept. For me, this was an affirmation of my view that I might actually be able to help people suffering under the yoke of oppression. It was proven correct at that one moment, and it was extraordinary."

Today, Genser quietly heads [Freedom Now](#), a nonprofit NGO that works to free individual prisoners of conscience. Through their focused legal, political and public relations advocacy efforts they've overseen the successful release of Aung San Sui Kiu and are currently campaigning for the release of 2010 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo.

NANCY BARRY

A graduate of Stanford and Harvard Business School, Nancy Barry eschewed the big-time money of big banks and decided instead to help struggling women around the world with the resource they were in need of most—small loans to start small businesses.

"The impact of these loans is extraordinary," said Barry. "Poor women have shown that they are the world's best customers, repaying their loans and using their increased income to feed, clothe, and educate their children and strengthen their communities."

Although some questioned her move from the the World Bank, a 6,000-person banking behemoth doling out \$250 million loans at a time, to the Women's World Banking, a 100-person boutique doling out just \$250, Barry silenced micro-lending critics and is credited as a pioneer in the field.

"[Poor people] show so much courage and ability to take the little that the deck has dealt them and transform it into livelihoods for their families and their communities," Barry [said](#) to *U.S. News*. "Once, few commercial banks would touch microfinance; now banks worldwide have discovered 'the fortune at the bottom of the pyramid.' "

Today the [WWB network](#) is a nonprofit organization of 53 microfinance institutions and banks making small loans to women in more than 40 countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East.

SHARAD DIXIT

Born in India in 1930, Dr. Sharad Dixit has performed over 65,000 plastic surgeries on poor children with cleft lips, squints, burn, scars and deformed noses during his four-decade career.

Most impressive? Dr. Dixit is wheelchair-bound, half-paralyzed, and lives with a heart capacity of 17 percent. On top of that, he has terminal cancer of the larynx and breathes out of his neck.

"If a poor man is born with a deformity, he is scarred for life," says Dixit, who trained himself to be ambidextrous after becoming paralyzed in a car accident in 1978. "He can't afford 25,000 rupees for the surgery. As a result he can't get a job, he can't get married, and he loses his confidence. All it takes is a donation of \$150 to take care of a deformed child in India, yet there are so few willing to help."

Splitting his time between Brooklyn and India, Dixit has invested his entire savings into the 30 camps he holds across India every year, until recently spending \$50,000 of his own money annually on needles, sutures and anaesthetics.

"I used to keep thinking I'm going to die," he said, "so I spent all my money!"

For his extraordinary efforts, Dixit, described by Dr. Lester Silver, chief of plastic surgery at Mount Sinai Medical Center, as "an ethical and moral giant," has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize five times. But you won't find him resting on his laurels.

"I don't like the celebrity status," says the doctor. "These awards mean nothing to me unless they are accompanied with a significant amount of money to help my cause. The prize money of the Nobel (\$1 million) can be used to expand the camps."

CHARLES FEENEY

Never heard of Charles Feeney? That's just the way he likes it.

Unlike his peers Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, the philanthropist has never made a big deal over his giving away money. In fact, he only revealed himself as a billionaire recently when a legal dispute left him with no choice but to reveal his financial records.

Feeney, who made his fortune building the Duty Free empire, set up his Atlantic Philanthropies in Bermuda for the same reason: anonymity. Despite the fact that the charity has given away \$4.2 billion since 1982 and is second only to Bill and Melinda Gates and Ford Foundation in annual giving, it get little attention or press because doesn't have to reveal its financial information.

"I feel it's my life," Mr. Feeney said. "I'd be the last guy to tell a wealthy person what to do with their money. They're entitled to do whatever they want."

Having already given away half his fortune, Feeney still has another \$4 billion to lose—a difficult proposition since he owns no homes, buys clothes off the rack, flies coach and still rides public transportation.

"A lot of wealthy people, they don't realize they have the alternatives of spending the money for good," he said. "If they knew it gives so much satisfaction, I wouldn't have to persuade them. The press says someone's 'one of the wealthiest persons in the world,' but he hasn't figured out how many grilled-cheese-and-tomato sandwiches that comes to. How many can you eat?"