

Just another religious volunteer

Could today's prosperity gusher turn Americans into selfish materialists? The evidence is somewhat mixed. Recently, for instance, the United Way chapter in the heart of booming Silicon Valley almost went bust. Nationwide, however, charitable donations rose 9 percent in 1999, and many Americans continue to carry out amazing acts of generosity. As an illustration, let me tell you about a man I met this month while observing the Stanley Cup playoffs in Dallas.

The NHL's Dallas Stars have been critical in spreading hockey into the Air-Conditioning Belt - Southern states where few citizens previously associated ice with speed, beauty and fun. Dallas has actually become a hockey hotbed, with kids rolling out of bed early in the morning to go wallop each other inside new rinks.

Stars fans have also become favorites of the TV networks. The cameras have proven particularly fond of comely Dallas women - they of the big hair, big teeth and big décolletage - who pack the stands wearing clothing that, well, doesn't have much thermal value.

Dr. Craig Hobar has something to do with the condition of both the Stars players and the Stars spectators. As a team doctor, it was he you saw skittering onto the ice in the final game of the Stanley Cup to patch up New Jersey star Petr Sykora after he ended up on national TV with his eyes rolled back in his head due to a concussion.

And Dr. Hobar also helped make some of those bouncy Dallas fans look as they do. The big hair and teeth are the work of other professionals, but certain of those big bustlines (and smooth faces and tucked tummies) were acquired right at the Dallas Plastic Surgery Institute, where Dr. Hobar is one of the most sought-after cosmetic surgeons in his city (a world capital for such procedures.)

The merits or demerits of manmade beauty are a subject for another day. What most interested me when I interviewed Dr. Hobar was what he does with the rest of his life. Not just his work with the Stars, or his two national judo championships.

To me, the most impressive, only-in-America, aspect of Craig Hobar's many achievements is a group he founded called LEAP (Life Enhancement Association for People). "I'm extremely grateful for my faith and what God has done in my life," he says. So he decided to give something back in Christian charity.

It all began with a mission trip Dr. Hobar took to the Dominican Republic more than 10 years ago, while he was still training to be a plastic surgeon. In that poor country, he saw many serious deformities, which were eminently repairable except for the lack of local resources. So he went home and organized teams of highly skilled surgeons, anesthesiologists, nurses and assistants willing to volunteer their time. He got Dallas area hospitals and medical companies to donate supplies. Now LEAP teams of 20 to 25 individuals descend on a poor region and, operating sunup to sundown for a week, offer "life-changing medical services in the name of Christ."

For a decade, Dr. Hobar and other volunteers he has mobilized - about 400 professionals so far - have been traveling to places like the Dominican Republic, Belize and Laos. They've provided thousands of indigent patients with free cleft palate reconstructions, artificial limbs and eyes, and repairs of serious facial deformities. Many of the deformities LEAP repairs are so severe the individuals involved have been shunned. Children with severe cleft palates are often unable to consume food without it spurting out their noses.

This is no dabbling hobby. Dr. Hobar takes four mission trips per year, each lasting about a week. As this column is published, he is in Belize

Thus does a professional practice built on modern image-consciousness and wealth produce some amazing acts of charity as well. And these particular acts of mercy track national trends showing charity and volunteerism up sharply since our current boom began in the early '80s.

In especially harsh cases, LEAP has brought patients to the U.S. for special treatment. Ana Hidalgo was born with neurofibromatosis - sometimes called Elephant Man's disease. A cauliflowered mass of flesh covered the right half of her pretty face, forcing her to live in painful isolation. Waiting mothers cried "Freak, freak," in panic when she arrived to see LEAP doctors in the Dominican Republic. Eventually, LEAP brought Ana to Dallas for a complex surgical reconstruction of her head. The 13-hour procedure involved Craig Hobar, five other doctors and scores of dedicated Christian volunteers.

At the time of her main operation, Ana requested another, much simpler, surgery. The effects of this second procedure leapt out when she looked upon her new face in recovery. There in the mirror were two freshly pierced ears. And from each, as she asked, there hung a shining cross - reminding Ana whom to thank for beginning her new life.