

Radical kindness: the banker who gave it all away

- Katherine Kizilos
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Philip and Trix Wollen own Kindness House in Fitzroy, where two thirds of the tenants don't pay rent.

ON THE face of it, kindness doesn't sound like a radical idea, just as Philip Wollen, at first glance, does not look like a radical. Wollen is a former merchant banker. He was a vice-president of Citibank when he was 34, and a general manager at Citicorp. *Australian Business Magazine* named him one of the top 40 headhunted executives in Australia. But about 1990 — he is not exactly sure of the year — Wollen decided to give away 90 per cent of his capital, a process he describes as "reverse tithing".

Since then Wollen has donated millions to improving the environment and helping the powerless — children, animals and the terminally ill — around the world. He sponsors the anti-whaling vessel the Sea Shepherd and the South Australian Children's Ballet Company, and has built schools, orphanages, lion parks and sanctuaries. His Winsome Constance Kindness Trust supports more than 400 projects in 40 countries. Wollen says his aim

is to die broke, to give away all he owns with "warm hands", and that he is on track to do so.

In recent years, he has occasionally appeared in the local press, writing a letter in support of animal rights, for instance, or responding to a humanitarian crisis. In 2005, when 104-year-old Chinese woman Cui Yu Hu, a resident of Melbourne, was struggling to receive an aged person's visa that would give her the right to medical benefits, Wollen offered to pay all her bills himself. In 2007, he was named Victorian of the Year.

But mostly he does his work away from the public gaze. The trust's website says "we don't want your money", and its mission statement is ambitious: "to promote kindness towards all other living beings and enshrine it as a recognisable trait in the Australian character and consciousness."

When Wollen decided to give away his millions, he was single. Now he is married to Trix and says he cannot imagine how he would get along without her. "I help with the practical aspects," she says quietly.

Our interview takes place at Kindness House, the trust's most visible presence in Melbourne. The building on the corner of Brunswick and Johnston streets in Fitzroy provides office space to 29 non-government organisations including the Wilderness Society, Greenpeace, the Australian West Papua Association, Social Firms Australia and Rescued with Love, an adoption program for small dogs.

On one side of the building, posters promoting local live acts are plastered on a "what's on wall". Local street artists were paid to paint the murals in the lane at the back. The young artists named the alley "Kindness Lane".

Two-thirds of the Kindness House tenants only pay for their phone bills: rent and internet is free. The office space includes a large communal area on the top floor where workshops can be held or films shown. Wollen had plans for the roof of the building that were abandoned after the Indian Ocean tsunami: the money was spent helping the tsunami victims instead.

Outside the Brunswick Street entrance is an open bird cage with a two-sided sign. One side bears William Blake's lines: "A robin red breast in a cage/
puts all of heaven in a rage". On the other is Wollen's own philosophy: "In their capacity to suffer, a dog is a pig is a bear ... is a boy."

The sign expresses the other strand of Wollen's radicalism: his commitment to animal rights. (Wollen does not believe his position is radical at all, arguing his background is "decidedly conservative": "What could be more radical than killing?")

He agrees with philosopher Peter Singer that animal rights pose "the greatest moral issue facing humanity since the abolition of slavery". As part of this philosophy, Wollen also opposes dairying, believing it to be cruel to animals and citing health and environmental concerns.

"To produce one litre of milk takes 1000 litres of water when we will soon be drinking recycled sewage," he says. Yet he also says he does not want those engaged in the industry to suffer, arguing they could be redeployed elsewhere. In India he funds "retirement homes" for abused cows. Their dung is fed through biogas plants to produce methane, which is then used as cooking gas. The plants also generate electricity, the cow urine is turned into medicine and farmers use the waste slurry as fertiliser.

Wollen describes himself as an "ahimsan", a term he has adopted from the Sanskrit word ahimsa, which means "non-violence to any living being". Ahimsa, he says, is "the most beautiful word ever written at any time, in any country, in human history".

Asked to explain the origins of his commitment to animal causes, he quotes King Lear, who asked the blind Earl of Gloucester: "How do you see the world?" Gloucester replied: "I see it feelingly."

Says Wollen in a measured way: "I heard the screams of my father as cancer ravaged his body, and then I realised I had heard those screams before — in slaughterhouses, in the dog meat markets, in cattle ships, and the dying mother whale as a harpoon explodes in her brain as she calls out to her calf. Their cries are the cries of my father. And I realised that when we suffer, we suffer as equals. Screams are identical from any species and in any language."

To believe that the suffering of an animal is morally equivalent to the suffering of a human is to inhabit a world in which cruelty is practised every day, everywhere. Wollen does not resile from the implications of this perspective. "I have seen horror inflicted on the powerless that terrified me and I still wake up in the middle of the night screaming with nightmares."

Yet asked if he is happier than he used to be before he decided to give his money away, he says: "Yes. 'Happy' is an odd word. I feel a sense of joy in every second of every day, because I know how precious and fleeting every second of life is. We deprive others of their lives at our own moral peril."

Wollen was educated in rural South Australia and was raised as an Anglican, but says he is comfortable with most religious traditions. He says he grew up with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jews and Jains but felt a particular affinity for the Jains with their philosophy of causing no harm to living beings. He acknowledges that this is not possible, but says it is his aim.

Humane slaughter, in Wollen's view, is an impossible idea that he likens to saying "rape is much better than it used to be". But he did once try to improve the practices at Cairo's Basateen slaughterhouse, where Australian livestock are killed according to halal guidelines; a decision he now regrets. "Our own animals had their eyes stabbed out and their tendons were slashed. I put money in, my own personal money to try and train the halal butchers and it has been an abject failure. They don't care."

Wollen then reflects that working in an abattoir takes a heavy toll on its labourers: "The most stressful job in the world — more than soldiers, brain surgeons and air traffic controllers is a slaughterhouse worker."

Some of Wollen's projects help animals and humans at the same time. In India, for example, he is helping reduce the incidence of rabies, which kills 50,000 people a year, by investing in an Indian program that captures, neuters and vaccinates street dogs (he prefers to call them community dogs, because neighbourhoods care for them). The dogs are then returned to the street corner where they were found. "If you release them back into the area, they will protect their territory," he says, arguing this helps keep the dog population lower — and is also kinder — than a simple extermination program. The initiative is being introduced in Middle Eastern countries where rabies continues to linger.

Wollen says that in choosing his projects, he is assisted by an international network of people whom he does not pay but relies on to tell him what is happening at the grassroots. His preference is for small programs that "punch above their weight".

In Korea he funds a group attempting to stop the practice of beating dogs to death in the market place "because Koreans believe that the more fear and suffering these animals experience, the tastier the meat".

In China he is trying to save the moon bears, which are kept in steel cages where catheters are attached to them; their bile is used in medicine. "They can't move, they can't scratch themselves and they try to kill themselves, and the Chinese smash out their teeth and chop off their fingers."

ASKED to name a project that has particular meaning for him, Wollen describes the Morning Star orphanage in Bangalore, a home to more than 60 children. It was started 20 years ago by John Samson who found "a starving two-year-old child thrown in a filthy rubbish bin". Samson found other abandoned children in quarries, beside railway tracks and on the street. Many have physical and mental disabilities; one was so malnourished he had chewed his own arm.

The disabled children receive 24-hour care in the home, and the more capable attend school. One has been accepted into a prestigious women's college, another is a gifted chess player. The first child found by Samson in the rubbish bin is a qualified pharmacist — he spent many years helping to care for his fellow orphans.

Trix's favourite scheme involves acquiring sloth bears from India's Kalander people, who have traditionally made a living by making the animals "dance". Wollen explains: "They kill the mother and they drive a hot poker through the nose of the cub and they put a piece of glass in there." The bears are always in pain and "dance" when a cord is pulled. In exchange for their bears, the Kalanders are offered a small-business opportunity — a rickshaw, say, or a fruit and vegetable shop. With a business, the Kalanders are able to settle and their children can go to school (the Wollens hope to fund a program that promises to pay dowries for the daughters if they stay at school until they are 18, as a way of delaying early teenage marriages among them).

Through the scheme, 500 bears have been given their freedom in a sanctuary. On a recent visit, the Wollens were amazed when two rescued bears that had received medical treatment clambered onto the back of a truck to join them.

"They hugged us, and they licked our face," recalls Wollen. "And they were huge. These were animals who had been tortured, tortured for years and they

had forgiven us. Forgiven us. I could never forgive someone who had done that to my wife, or my mum or my sister or my daughter. "

"It was so beautiful," recalls Trix, "they were eating honey out of our hands". Then she remembered that one of the bears stood on Wollen's foot, which was bruised "for weeks and weeks".

"I think he broke my toe," says Wollen, adding later: "He was a lovely guy".

PHILIP WOLLEN CV

BORN 1950

MARRIED Trix

CAREER Former vice-president of Citibank and general manager of Citicorp. Also set up own advisory company.

OCCUPATION Founder of the Winsome Constance Kindness Trust, named after his mother and grandmother.

AWARDS Medal of the Order of Australia, 2005;

Australian Humanitarian Award, 2006;

Victorian of the Year, 2007.

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