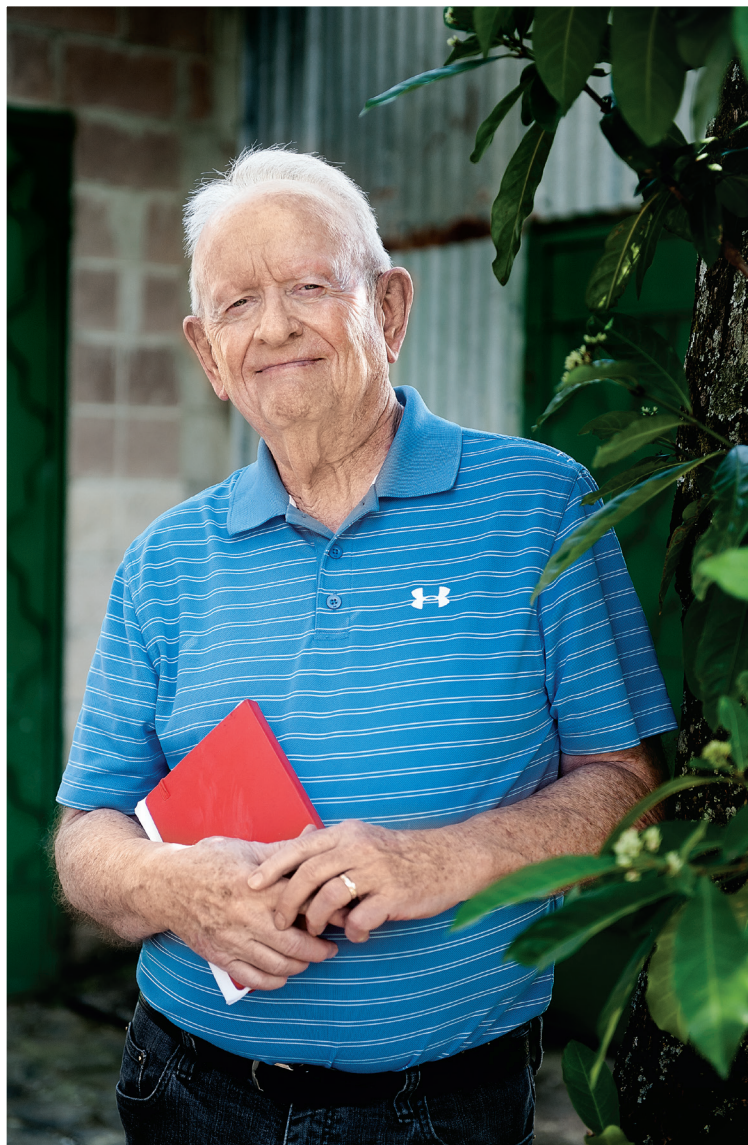


Motivated by people, not profit, accountant **Ken Dick** founded **Speroway** to bring food, healthcare and education to the world's most destitute

by **Roberta Staley** photos by **Tallulah Photo**



Man on a Mission

THE CANADIAN DOCTORS have nicknamed it Somalia — this slum located on the outskirts of San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador — because of the dust, the overcrowding, the isolation and the desperation. Yet this shantytown of about 6,000 souls has a disheveled beauty, with overgrown grasses and pink flowering bushes shading the rutted dirt lanes that separate shacks made of plastic sheeting and corrugated iron. Today, one lane is packed with hundreds of residents who stand patiently, nursing

babies or consoling whimpering children, ignoring the furtive curs darting between their legs. It is not yet 8 a.m., but many have been here since dawn to ensure they see one of the two-dozen volunteer doctors, nurses and dentists setting up stations at this clinic, which is being cobbled together with the speed of a Barnum & Bailey travelling circus.

The linchpin of today's visit is 76-year-old professional accountant Ken Dick, bespectacled, balding and with a slight paunch, yet straight-backed and alert, his blue eyes



Left: Speroway's visit to an El Salvador slum creates an almost carnival-like atmosphere, as medics provide relief to the poor. Right: Volunteer doctors each diagnose and treat dozens of patients in a single day. Bottom: Local physician Sandra Contreras works alongside Canadian Speroway volunteers

taking in the chaotic scene, assessing where help is needed, ready to give advice or add a bit of muscle. This makeshift clinic is the final stop in a five-day medical mission undertaken by Speroway, an Ontario faith-based charity that provides meals to Canada's hungry and delivers food, medicine, healthcare and education to those in developing nations. Speroway is Dick's brainchild, started in 2003 as an offshoot of the US charity Feed the Children.

The year 2003 was pivotal for Dick. He was turning 64 and felt it was time to take down the shingle on his eponymous accounting firm, where he did tax and auditing work. But he was restless. Dick recalled his early days with the children's charity World Vision Canada. As its CFO for 15 years, Dick had overseen

remarkable growth. When he left, the annual operating budget was \$60 million, up from \$4 million when he started. Maybe, Dick mused to his wife, Marlene, it was time to "start helping children again."

Helping others, especially children, has consumed Dick for much of his life. In the past dozen years, Speroway missions — which include volunteer nurses, dental hygienists, pharmacists, paramedics, doctors and dentists — have helped the poor in Ontario as well as communities in Haiti, Kenya, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador. In most neighbourhoods, the need is daunting.

Today is no different. This slum, which sits on the city's former garbage dump, was created by the survivors of El Salvador's many natural disasters. There is no running water or sewage system. Toilets are holes in the ground; when they overflow, a new hole is dug. Few homes have electricity. There are few jobs. Teenage girls birth a succession of babies whose prospects are as bleak as their mothers'. Come nightfall, the slum becomes a hangout for gang members. This is a place, says Dick, where hope is dim. But something as simple as a visit to the dentist or doctor can reignite hope. "If you do not have your health, you can't do anything else," he says.

To some, helping the poor in nations such as El Salvador, which was mired in a 12-year civil war until 1992, may seem quixotic. But to Dick, who lives in Burlington, Ont., helping the globe's most destitute is the anchor for how he engages with the world. Early in his accounting career, at the age of 33 and with



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four children, he left the corporate fast track as a financial controller at Nestlé Canada to work for World Vision Canada. Nestlé's president said, "Are you crazy? You're leaving your career here to go work for a charity?" Dick responded, "My motivation now is people, not profit."

But helping people takes more than idealism. Although he looks to his Christian faith for inspiration, it is Dick's well-honed management and business acumen that has driven his success. When he was hired by World Vision Canada as its CFO in 1975, the charity's focus was increasing its support in Canada. It boldly organized a first for Canada: a three-hour TV telethon sharing the stories of children in need. Broadcast across British Columbia out of Vancouver, the charity hoped to attract 1,000 child sponsors. Three times that number called in, Dick recalls. "It was amazing."

Over the next decade, Dick's responsibilities grew. He remained CFO in Canada, while guiding the globalization of the charity, creating World Vision International, then headquartered in Monrovia, Calif. Dick became its off-and-on vice-president of finance, running the internal audit department and undertaking field trips to set up World Vision offices overseas.

Speroway's roots lie in the US. Larry Jones, founder of Feed the Children, had known Dick professionally for many years and asked him to put together a new charity, bolstered by a strong base of 4,000 Feed the Children supporters living in Canada. Due to legalities, Dick couldn't use the name Feed the Children Canada, so settled on FTC Canada. This confused donors, so Dick rebranded it Speroway, or "way of hope."

Dick focused on soliciting gifts in kind — in 2014 Speroway received nearly \$11 million worth of food and hygiene products that it stored in a warehouse in Guelph, Ont. It distributed the food with the help of local Ontario charities and also sent containers of food overseas, where it was distributed by local NGOs.

Speroway's medical missions began in 2006 with a trip to Honduras. Four years later, following Haiti's devastating earthquake, Dick organized a team of 10 Canadian paramedics and three doctors to fly to the capital of Port-au-Prince with medical supplies and 50,000 units of morphine. The team stayed for eight days, treating broken bones, severed limbs, lacerations and punctured lungs.

Altruism drives many members of the medical profession and these are the individuals who have connected with Speroway to ask Dick if they can help on missions. A huge part of Speroway's success is the willingness of these Canadians to pay their own expenses. Speroway has a handful of salaried employees, including its Central American director, Efrain de los Rios, who did yeoman's work organizing the most recent El Salvador mission. The rest of the 40-person crew, however, paid their own way — bringing down hockey bags full of medical supplies and even covering the cost of their mobile dental units, receiving a charity receipt for accrued expenses.

Back at the slum, the huge lineup has dispersed into several uneven queues along the laneway. Hundreds still wait for medical care. Others need to see a dentist. Some wait at the pharmacy to collect prescription drugs. Everyone stops at a supply hut giving out food, protein powder, children's clothing and toys. Overseeing the activity are six Policía Nacional Civil de El Salvador officers in black uniforms, armed with machine guns and hand pistols, keeping watch for possible gang violence.

Over at the makeshift dental clinic, with walls of thin cotton sheets strung together, the dentists undertake fillings, extractions, bonding and root canals using their small high-tech mobile dental units, which are powered by two noisy generators. The dentists face the same problems they have encountered in the past four days: rampant

decay — even among tots just sprouting their first teeth — due to a lack of brushing and an obsession with sugary colas. Today the dental team, which will treat more than 200 patients, will pull more teeth than can be saved by endodontist Domenic Delle Donne of Milton, Ont., who performs root canals.

Across the laneway, an elderly woman stumbles into the medical clinic, panting with fright and exhaustion, and then collapses in a chair. "We have an EMT here," Dick says calmly, and fetches paramedic Glen Canavan of Halton, Ont. Canavan suspects an angina attack — a spasm of

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Left: Children in El Salvador suck on bags of chilled cola, making the treat last for hours. Unfortunately, the continuous bath of sugar, caffeine and acid rots their teeth, leaving Speroway dentists to fix the damage. Right: An elderly woman gets her blood pressure checked as part of a medical assessment

the coronary arteries — and administers nitroglycerin spray under the woman's tongue. Now it's a waiting game. While the woman's daughter lovingly strokes her mother's waist-length white hair, the nitroglycerin takes effect and the panicked, pained look softens into one of relief.

Dick goes back into the 32 C sunlight to look at the still-enormous lineup — Speroway will treat more than 1,000 medical and dental patients today — and spies a girl in a red wheelchair. It is obviously too small; her long, thin legs jut uncomfortably up to her waist. The mother, Margarita, explains that her daughter, Sonia, was born three-and-a-half-months premature and has never been able to walk. Dick makes a decision. A medical supply store at a nearby shopping mall supplies wheelchairs, and he and de los Rios jump into an SUV to purchase a larger one. While at the mall, they order pizzas for the Speroway crew — fuel for the long afternoon ahead. The wheelchair is \$339 and Milton, Ont., dentist Mark Cross covers the cost. "My dad, Jack, gave me some money to give to someone who was really in need," Cross says to Sonia, bending down to give her a gentle kiss on the cheek.

Later that afternoon, exhaustion from the heat and the 12-hour days takes its toll. Dental assistant Iris Renderos is put on an intravenous drip due to dehydration — an experience Dick is familiar with after nearly collapsing two years ago. Other Canadians are suffering from colds and upset stomachs. "Everyone's just worn out," says Dick.

Still, there is much to celebrate. Dermatologist Channy Muhn of Burlington,

Ont., removes numerous skin cancers. Chronic leg ulcers are debrided and bandaged. A baby with bronchitis is sent to hospital. People with missing front teeth leave the dentist's chair with a perfect smile. But there are disheartening situations too, such as a suspected case of child sexual abuse. In El Salvador, with its nebulous safety net, such situations often go uninvestigated.

At 4:30 p.m., the clinic is dismantled as quickly as it went up. The Canadians must be out of the slum before dark to avoid the gangs. It is a bittersweet moment. Not only is this the end of the mission, but it is also the last time that Dick will accompany the Canadian healthcare team. Last year, at age 75, Dick stepped down as president of Speroway and the board appointed Ken Forbes. However, as Dick did with World Vision Canada, he leaves Speroway vibrant, healthy and growing. Last November, he succeeded in the creation of a new sister charity, Speroway US.

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But it is the new, \$587,000, 334-square-metre clinic in San José Villanueva outside San Salvador that Dick is most proud of. It is the manifestation of a dream he had several years ago. Following the mission to Haiti, he planned to erect a clinic to provide ongoing care to the injured but land wasn't available for such a project, and the idea withered. Later, Dick mentioned his thwarted plans to a local charity in El Salvador, which put him in touch with Mayor Pedro Duran of San José Villanueva. Duran pledged to donate land for a Speroway clinic to provide services to area residents, who are desperately in need of healthcare.

Logically, raising such a large amount of money should have been a challenge. It wasn't, as it turned out, thanks to "old friendships," says Dick. One day, while golfing with members of The Pottruff Family Foundation of Toronto, several Speroway doctors excitedly outlined plans for the proposed clinic. The result was a six-figure donation from the foundation, pledged before the 18th hole. Meanwhile, David Stiller of London, Ont., who oversees the C. H. Stiller Memorial Foundation, donated \$250,000 toward construction of the clinic. "I've known Ken

since the early 1990s," says Stiller, who flew to El Salvador for the grand opening of the clinic. "He always had a great heart for the disadvantaged. This has been his dream — this is his baby."

Later that night, Speroway workers and their spouses, as well as the El Salvadoran volunteers, gather together at the Sheraton Presidente San Salvador Hotel for a celebratory dinner to say their goodbyes to Dick. Emotions run high. Muhn takes the microphone, saying, "Thank you, Ken — you're my hero. Most of us wouldn't be here if it wasn't for your deep compassion to care for others." Dentist Jack Cottrell from Port Perry, Ont., who heads up the Speroway dental team, gets up to say, "Ken's the reason that we are here, and the reason we have a dental team. He is our leader and we would follow him to the ends of the earth."

As the saying goes, hope springs eternal. And it is Dick's hope that he has left a strong enough legacy to ensure that Speroway continues to bring hope to the destitute around the world for many, many years to come.

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