Henri Landwirth

Founder
Give Kids The World

Like the special children Give Kids The World serves, its founder, Henri Landwirth, knows all to well what it is like to give up his childhood. Born in Antwerp, Belgium, on March 7, 1927, Henri and his family were separated and became prisoners in the Nazi death and labor camps during WWII. Henri spent the years between the ages of 13 and 18 in camps including Auschwitz and Matthausen. By war's end, both of his parents had been killed, but miraculously Henri and his twin sister, Margot, survived and were reunited. Henri worked his way to America on a freight ship, arriving in New York City with $20 in his pocket and little knowledge of the English language; soon after he was drafted to serve in the Army.

Henri used his GI benefits to learn hotel management and landed a position in a hotel, taking every opportunity to learn each job in the industry. This first job became a lifelong career.

Landwirth moved to Florida in 1954 and began to manage the 100-room Starlight Motel in Cocoa Beach, near Cape Canaveral. Space exploration was in its early days and the original Mercury 7 astronauts and newsmen covering their adventures made the Starlight their temporary residence. It was during this time that Henri forged lasting friendships with the astronauts and newsmen, including Senator John Glenn and Walter Cronkite; friendships that continue today.

Since his retirement in 1986 from a successful, innovative hotel industry career that spanned more than 50 years, Henri has devoted himself to improving the lives of those in need through numerous foundations and non-profit organizations he has founded in addition to Give Kids The World.

With the original astronauts, Henri founded the Mercury Seven Foundation, now known as the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation, which provides scholarships to promising young science students. Through the Fanny Landwirth Foundation, named for his mother, he has built a senior citizen center and a children's school in Orlando and created a scholarship program for underprivileged children in Israel.

In 2000, Henri founded Dignity U Wear, an organization that provides hope to children and their families who are homeless, abused, abandoned, or neglected by providing them with new clothing. Today this organization supports shelters in nine states.

Henri has earned numerous honors, including being named in 1988 as one of the 12 Most Caring Individuals in America by the Caring Institute and the Parent's Magazine Humanitarian of the Year and the Orlando Sentinel's Floridian of the Year in 1994. On June 13, 1997, Henri received an honorary doctorate of Humane Letters from the University of Cincinnati. He has twice been invited to carry the Olympic Torch.

His latest initiative is called Hate Hurts, a program that shares the message of how important it is to forgive those who have hurt us, as well as ending our own acts of hatred, no matter how small. Henri now tours colleges and high schools speaking about the lessons he has learned about the virtues of forgiveness.

Henri's life and the story of Give Kids The World are chronicled in his book, "Gift of Life" which was published in 1996.

Henri's Bio