

A portrait of Richard Walden, a middle-aged man with grey hair, wearing a bright red jacket over a white shirt and blue jeans. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

**RICHARD
WALDEN**

IN
**"REBEL
WITHOUT
A CAUSE"**

BY LARRY TEITELBAUM

*WRITES HIS OWN SCRIPT AS HEAD OF A SMALL
DISASTER RELIEF ORGANIZATION WITH OUTSIZE
INFLUENCE. HE TWEAKS THE ESTABLISHMENT
AND GETS THINGS DONE ...*

... WHAT BETTER LEGACY FOR A SIXTIES REFUGEE AND HOLLYWOOD GUY WITH GRAND AMBITIONS AND AN EVEN GRANDER STYLE.

► At the height of the Vietnam War, President Nixon ordered the bombing of Cambodia to weaken Viet Cong forces camped in the border areas. The action prompted some of the most intense protests of the war. Then in law school, Richard Walden C'68, L'72 got permission to delay his finals to march on Washington. Like many of his classmates, Walden hated the war and feared being drafted. He had to interrupt his first year of law school for Army Reserves training. Such was his contempt for U.S. intervention that Walden vowed to never set foot in Southeast Asia.

And yet, four years after the end of the conflict, in 1979, Walden found himself contemplating a trip to the region. He and a friend were at his Venice Beach house in California reading a tragic *Los Angeles Times* article about the Boat People — 2500 starving Vietnamese refugees who were stranded off the coast of Malaysia on a freighter. Walden, a civil rights attorney in Beverly Hills and commissioner of hospitals under Gov. Jerry Brown at the time, was sickened by what he read, and his revulsion about the war gave way to altruism.

He wanted to help but did not know how. As is his wont, Walden played an angle. That day he also read that McDonnell Douglas had to ground its fleet of DC-10s due to a crash of one of its planes. He called the chairman and convinced him to take a flier and give him a plane for the mission. About a month later, Air Walden took off and delivered surgical supplies from his parents' busi-

ness, tons of vitamins from his friend's company, and scores of five-gallon jugs for water from the Atlantic Richfield oil company.

The mission brought Walden instant media attention, including four consecutive mornings on *Good Morning America*. It also drew a call from Julie Andrews, who saw him on television and wanted to get involved because she had adopted two Vietnamese children.

With Andrews' financial support, Walden's brainstorm grew into Operation USA, a thriving disaster relief organization now headquartered in West Hollywood. In thirty-four years of existence the nonprofit has provided services to some 100 countries, dispensed \$400 million in aid, and shared in the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for its role in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

Four hundred million dollars over more than three decades is pocket change compared to the sheer volume of funds available to the American Red Cross and other major relief organizations. But Walden keeps Operation USA small by design, preferring to run a ten-person nonprofit that accepts no federal money. Instead, he raises money through foundations, private donations, and corporate matching social responsibility funds, and through sponsorship of benefit concerts and movie premieres. Doing so buys him the independence to get money where it's needed fast and the latitude to skirt the vicissitudes of U.S. policy and work where he wants, often negotiating directly with foreign governments.

Operation USA is "like a one-man AID at this point," says Walden, referring to the U.S. government's foreign assistance program. Walden's interest is piqued when he can work somewhere new with partners who can pay for the shipping of supplies and not steal the product — an issue in parts of the world.

Having grown up in the glow of Hollywood, the Los Angeles native casts himself in the role of a freewheeling, Indiana Jones-like character who seeks adventure and plays by his own rules. Walden, who is the president and CEO of Operation USA, regularly inserts himself into hotspots, such as Cuba, where he supplied pediatric hospitals and counts Fidel Castro as an admirer; Sierra Leone, where his organization shipped incubators, baby warmers, X-ray and ultrasound equipment to the war-stricken country; and Cambodia, where he conducted the first private airlift of supplies after the overthrow of Pol Pot. Although Walden spends more time overseas, he has also ridden to the rescue of Americans besieged by Hurricane Katrina and the Oklahoma City tornado, supporting 50 community health centers in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Mississippi and sending money, cleaning supplies and generators to Oklahoma. Last year he provided cash grants and sent cleaning supplies to New Jersey and New York after Hurricane Sandy.

In some circles, he is best known for his work on the campaign to ban landmines, for which his organization shared the ultimate accolade, the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize. (He didn't get a big head over it, and, in fact, lobbied the Nobel Committee for the prize to go to landmine victims.)

At that time there were approximately 100 million landmines in the world. Experts say 26,000 civilians are killed

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or injured by them every year. Walden had been providing prosthetic limbs to victims in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and a host of other countries, but he wanted to eliminate landmines altogether. So he joined a coalition of organizations and set out to find an advanced technology to detect and dispose of the deadly explosives.

He was fortunate to meet the former head of NASA's robotics unit on a chance visit to his daughter's summer "Robot Camp." She invited him to ad-

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dress 400 NASA scientists. One thing led to another and eventually Walden found himself meeting with the Departments of Defense and State to convince officials to support the development of new mine detection technology. When that went nowhere, Walden spoke with scientists at California's Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and New Mexico's Los Alamos National Laboratory, best known for the development of nuclear weapons, and they agreed to send scientists to field test new technologies to detect landmines in Cambodia. But all of his efforts came to naught. One hundred twenty-one countries signed a treaty in Canada to ban landmines, and the Nobel committee recognized the achievement. However, the treaty had been undercut when several key countries, including the United States, Israel and Russia, withheld support.

Despite his good works, Walden acknowledges that early critics in the relief community considered him a Hollywood huckster. But he remains unbowed. He touts his ties to A-list celebrities such as Bill Maher and Jackson Browne and brags about his production of benefit concerts with the likes of Frank Sinatra, Michael Jackson, Placido Domingo and more.

He also embraces his bleeding heart liberalism, showcased in the columns he writes for *The Huffington Post* about service, charity and his distaste for behemoth disaster relief organizations, which he regularly criticizes for devoting too much of their resources to overhead and bloated salaries. Overall, the 67-year-old Walden has figured out how to revel in the role of earnest everyman while having, truth be told, a helluva time saving the world.

“The notion that you're flying in somewhere with a load of antibiotics or

water pumps or malaria nets is very satisfying,” says Walden, “especially if you're the one who gathered them together and arranged for the plane and you weren't just a passive person in a grant-making organization.”

Walden says he lives in a modest house by Hollywood mogul standards and earns less than a first-year associate at a big law firm. But there are perks. He receives tens of millions of frequent flyer miles from United Airlines to fly anywhere in the world at a moment's notice; he pays nothing for a 25,000-square-foot warehouse supplied by the City of Los Angeles; and he gets to work closely with his friend Julie Andrews.

Doug Frenkel W'68, L'72, who went to college and law school with Walden, expresses admiration for his charitable chutzpah. “He's always been a real entrepreneur and operator and audacious,” says Frenkel, the former director of the Penn Law Gittis Center for Clinical Legal Studies. “How many people have done what he's done? He's done a lot and in a unique way. You've got to marvel, or at least have huge respect, for what he's pulled off.”

Walden spent his Penn Law years as a rebel with a cause. Even then, he exhibited a showman's flair and ability to place himself in the center of the action. To wit, Walden belonged to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a bastion of Black Power, at a time when it purged itself of white members. Walden gained instant street cred when he recruited NBA legend Wilt Chamberlain, a committed Republican, to participate in a fund-raising event in West Philadelphia. Of a piece, he represented notorious Black Panther leader Huey Newton in a civil rights case against Police Chief Frank Rizzo and the Philadelphia Police Department. Walden, Elizabeth Freed-



CHENGDU, CHINA
Richard Walden, president and CEO of Operation USA, worked with the Honeywell Corporation to build two primary schools in the Sichuan Province of China following a catastrophic earthquake that damaged or destroyed up to 7,000 schools. Here he attends the opening of one of the schools.



VIETNAM
Walden visits Vietnam with actress and singer Julie Andrews, a co-founder of Operation USA. Andrews adopted two Vietnamese children in 1975.



JACMEL, HAITI
Operation USA teamed with Honeywell again to build a 40,000-square-foot school complex in Jacmel, a seaside town in Haiti savaged by an earthquake.

man L'72, and two local lawyers won in federal court.

During that period, Walden also accepted an invitation from Penn Law professor Ed Sparer to join him in Las Vegas to protest the denial of benefits to hotel maids. The protest culminated with a march through the doors of Caesar's Palace orchestrated by civil rights leader Ralph Abernathy, the heir to Martin Luther King, Jr., although the highlight might have been Walden's shared occupancy of a motel suite with Jane Fonda, fresh off her starring role in *Barbarella*. They became lifelong friends.

Indeed, the anything-goes spirit of his college years carried over to Walden's career. After graduation, he snagged a job as deputy counsel of the New York City Health Services Administration under Mayor John V. Lindsay, before moving back to California to work for Legal Aid of San Diego and for Gov. Jerry Brown.

Gov. Brown appointed Walden commissioner of hospitals after he filed four ACLU lawsuits over a series of deaths in state mental institutions. When the governor called Walden late at night to complain, he invited Brown to bring along his girlfriend Linda Ronstadt and tour state hospitals with him that night. Before long, the phone rang again, this time with an offer to lead the hospital system he had criticized.

Similarly, Operation USA grew out of grievance, as well as Walden's realization that he had a knack for bailing out people

in need. His trip to Malaysia to aid the Boat People bred an extraordinary string of projects for an organization with an annual budget of less than \$2 million.

Walden has logged three million miles to heal the world's wounds. He's been to the most dangerous places on earth, sometimes using old Playboy magazines (his wife, Rosanne Katon, is a former Playboy centerfold) to defuse crises, such as when, on his way to El Salvador, he diverted a Mexican customs official intent on collecting \$100,000 in tribute. He's made up to 300 shipments a year, spawning, by his account, a new generation of NGOs who use his model to collaborate with companies and ship surplus supplies abroad.

"He's found a niche ... and has been able to be very creative," says Michael Mahdesian, former deputy for the Bureau of Humanitarian Response at the U.S. State Department and USAID during the Clinton administration and chairman of the board of Operation USA. "If he hits a wall he'll find ways to go around it or drill under it."

In recent years, Walden has become more interested in long-term education and development projects than in immediate disaster relief. Ever resourceful, he finagled two new Boeing 737s to transport a load of books and establish the first public library in Rwanda. Earlier this year, Operation USA joined with Honeywell to open a senior citizens center in a fishing village in Japan that

had been decimated by the tsunami. But his organization's landmark achievement was a 40,000-square-foot school complex in Haiti after a 7.0 earthquake destroyed more than 4,000 schools.

The Haiti project is vintage Walden. He teamed with Honeywell again to build nine school buildings in the seaside town of Jacmel. Bigger organizations pledged millions of dollars but their projects remain sidelined, ensnared in red tape almost three years later. Meanwhile, Walden formed a bond with the mayor to cut through the bureaucracy and corruption. He managed to get an architectural firm and a structural engineering company to donate their services, and he completed an earthquake-resistant complex, with a computer lab, library, cafeteria, a sustainable community garden, and an athletic field, in one of the poorest countries on earth, six months after the quake.

Walden nursed a vision when he started out thirty-four years ago. He would work with companies to deliver surplus goods to regions torched by war, devastated by nature, or both. He'd wear a white hat in a black arts world. Back in the late seventies, practically no NGOs followed Walden's path. Today there are hundreds, some of which work with celebrities and corporations to bring light to the darkest corners of civilization.

It is almost as if Operation USA is in the mainstream. Oh, how Walden must hate that notion.