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## One for all

Scion of prominent Hong Kong-based Indian family is devoted to charity and inspires others to donate

By KITTY GO in Hong Kong  
For China Daily Asia Weekly

David Harilela traces his lineage to one of Hong Kong's most prominent Indian families, is a successful businessman in his own right and an active member of the city's celebrity circuit. However, it is not these attributes that make him stand out among the elite of the city.

In recent years, Harilela has won laurels for tapping his connections to the rich and famous, and using his business acumen to work tirelessly to raise money for the less fortunate. The vehicle of this humanitarian movement is called The One, which he launched in 2011.

Harilela heads his own 30-year-old business, Harilela George, which encompasses trading, licensing, shipping and manufacturing. He is also a popular singer on the Asian charity circuit and has shared the bill with renowned musical bands The Beach Boys and Blondie for two fundraising balls at The Foreign Correspondents Club in Hong Kong.

"I quit music in the 1970s to dedicate my life to being a businessman ... so I could better serve and look after my family," he said.

It was his decision to join the Rotary Club of Kowloon Golden Mile, about 15 years ago, that eventually transformed his life. "I have been a workaholic all my life. Perhaps God wants charity to be my business, I really don't know," he said as he reflected on his years of service at Rotary and for various charities in different capacities that culminated in The One.

Harilela is not sure if charity work has improved his business life, but is emphatic that "it allows me to feel God and understand goodness better". He admitted to being a very religious man but added that he was alienated from God for a period of time.

"I could not accept the thought that a loving God can allow innocent children to die or be neglected ... I now do (humanitarian work) to find my peace with God and because this is the best way I can help to make a positive impact for the needy in the world."

His father George had urged him to join Rotary since other senior members of the extended Harilela family were active in the international service organization. After joining Rotary, he participated in many projects such as health check-ups for the elderly and operations to correct

cleft palates in children. But nothing moved him more than the club's Gift of Life program in Shanghai.

Harilela remembers his involvement in the program as a defining moment. "We were a group of 10 members from the Rotary Club of Kowloon Golden Mile who sponsored to heal one child with a hole in the heart for \$5,000. I believe this was over 15 years ago."

Visiting these children left an indelible impression. He was amazed at "how happy and simple they really were in spite of having to live with this horrible affliction."

He noted with humility how "for just several thousand dollars" Rotary's Gift of Life program allows club members "to play God for a moment in their lives. Can you imagine? I saved one life simply by donating money."

Harilela was so moved by the exercise that he followed up with a personal donation to help another child.

"(The meeting with the afflicted children) was something our group will never forget, as we tried in vain to hold back our tears when we saw the miracle of our healed children and their smiles of gratitude as well as that of their mothers," he added.

"The scars on their chests were a small price to pay for salvation. Sadly, we also learned that some children were incurable and inoperable. But we had the opportunity to make a difference, and from that day on I became a lifetime, dedicated Rotarian."

In 2011, when he became a Rotary district governor, he wondered how he could inspire the more than 2,000 members of the club in Hong Kong, Macao and Mongolia.

"I asked myself: 'What is it that I can do to make the world a better place?' The answer came to me when I heard of the inspirational works of (German surgeon and aid worker) Dr Hendrik Wuebben at a talk about his works during one of our club meetings."

The story of Wuebben's sacrifices and his determination to serve others, even after being mugged by a patient that he had cured, inspired Harilela.

"I then decided to combine his great work and that of my other favorite heroine, the late Mother Teresa, to create The One, an annual humanitarian award that recognizes the work of unsung heroes of the world, the future Mother Teresas," he said.

Although Harilela was convinced that establishing The One was the right move, the biggest challenge he faced was in starting a global search

for such distinguished humanitarians from "tiny Hong Kong".

However, in such situations he believes God always helps him out.

He said that every time he asked for time to speak about The One at venues and programs locally and overseas, he was allowed to do so, even in places where he was not slated or allowed to talk.

"That was Miracle No 1."

To him, 'Miracle No 2' occurred when he providentially met Hong Kong-based model Cissy Wang and was able to recruit her husband, entertainment powerhouse and action star Donnie Yen, as the charity's ambassador.

"Miracle No 3 happened while I was lunching one day with Richard Elman, the (then) chairman and CEO of the Noble Group and I mentioned The One to him. He immediately took a liking to the concept and agreed to fund the winner with \$50,000 every year for the first three years."

"(Elman) was so happy with the amount of nominations we received. Who would have believed that we would come up with so many unsung heroes (who are involved in humanitarian work) from the very beginning? (Elman) immediately doubled his (annual) commitment to \$100,000 for the three years."

So at the first award gala dinner where the winner and three finalists were announced, the cash prizes were set up to be \$100,000 for the grand prize and \$5,000 for each of the three finalists.

That was when 'Miracles 4 and 5' occurred, Harilela recalled. "Sitting in the audience was a gentleman named Peter Bennett (a successful financier), who rose to speak and asked why we were giving the other three finalists (of the annual humanitarian award) only \$5,000 each."

Bennett then added that he would donate \$50,000 to each of the finalists. He has since become an integral part of The One organization.

"Miracle No 5 happened at this year's gala dinner when a good friend, Christian Larpin rose to ask why we were giving the other three finalists only \$50,000. And he wanted to donate a further \$50,000 to each of the other three finalists, so that for this year's award every finalist received \$100,000," Harilela said.

Harilela said he continues to be humbled by the generosity of those who step forward at critical moments to donate to charity.

In 2015, the charity launched a separate Hong Kong award of HK\$400,000 (\$52,000), to be shared by three unsung local humanitarian heroes every year.

"We hope that by showing such great heroes from Hong Kong and the world, we can inspire more greatness in others as well as raise the mood everywhere, as everyone loves a hero," he noted.

"When the world is in chaos, give me a hero. I am working now to launch The One in other Asian countries, so that we can truly benefit the needy everywhere in the world."



CAI MENG / CHINA DAILY

## Bio

## David Harilela

CEO, Harilela George  
CEO, HPZI International  
Director, Hotel Holdings

## Education:

2015: Honorary PhD in business administration, City University of Hong Kong

1974: BSc in business administration, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA

## Career:

1984-Present: CEO, Harilela George

2006-Present: Director, Harilela Hotels

2006-Present: Director, Hotel Holdings

2013-Present: Vice-patron, The Community Chest of Hong Kong

2003-Present: Trustee and founder, George and Chandra Harilela Foundation

2015-2017: Chair, Rotary International Global Rewards Program

2007-2013: Director, The Community Chest of Hong Kong

2011-2012: District governor, Rotary International District 3450

## Quick takes:

Who is your role model?

My father, the late George Harilela. From an early age I witnessed this great man being generous to anyone who came to him asking for help. It got to the stage that if any orange-robed men (a reference to Indian priests due to the color of their dress) approached my father, they would walk away with thousands of dollars in donations. I established the George and Chandra Harilela Foundation over 10 years ago in honor of his good name, to continue his causes and to do any good I could in his name.

How do you combine your musical talent and charity?

I use this small talent to entertain friends by singing at parties or charitable functions, so that I can hopefully add value to the event. I have performed at many charity events, including those hosted by Lifeline Express, Changing Young Lives Foundation, Orbis, the United Nations and Mother's Choice, to name a few. I have never charged a penny for my services and never will. I only hope I can help these causes to achieve more. I am also very proud that I was able to raise almost HK\$900,000 (\$116,000) for The Community Chest of Hong Kong by singing live on (the terrestrial TV broadcaster) TVB during its fundraiser in 2012.

Date of birth: April 25, 1949

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