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Youngster With a Vision

Ralph Gardner Jr. Meets 14-year-old Lillian Pravda, Founder of Vision For and From Children

By RALPH GARDNER JR.

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Lillian Pravda started her charity Vision For and From Children when she was 8 years old. She'd had two eye surgeries by the time she was 5. *Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal*

The Barnes & Noble on 86th Street and Lexington Avenue has a clever holiday-season program: It invites representatives of local charities and literacy and arts organizations to gift-wrap customers' purchases, thus exempting its own employees from having to do so. The groups get to keep any tips and, more importantly, to spread the word and drum up support for their good work.

That's how I met 14-year-old Lillian Pravda last month. Lillian cheerfully—and I might add quickly and expertly—wrapped several books I'd bought as Christmas presents while telling me about her charity, Vision For and From Children.

Because of her youth, I assumed Lillian was merely a volunteer for the organization. But her seriousness of purpose and practiced spiel soon made it clear that Vision For and From Children, which raises funds to provide eye surgery for children in the U.S. and in the developing world, was entirely her baby.

Being a cynical Upper East Sider, I assumed her group had to be a carefully crafted ploy to buff her brag sheet and get her into her first-choice college. I'd seen it before.

But when we reconnected last week at Barnes & Noble—meeting in a downstairs event space—she pointed out that she's still a bit young to be plotting her college admissions strategy.

"College is a few years away," Lillian explained sensibly. "I like to live in the now."

The sentiment might sound as if it emerged from the mouth of someone in her 30s, 40s or 80s. But Lillian seems nothing if not wise beyond her years, her slightly gangly adolescent grace and the sparkly blush on her cheeks notwithstanding. She started Vision For and From Children when she was 8. And that merely formalized something she'd been doing since she was 6 years old—providing moral support and toys, such as teddy bears and Magna Doodles, to children at local hospitals who were about to undergo eye surgery.

Lillian had no trouble empathizing with the patients, some of them infants. She'd had two eye surgeries of her own by the time she was 5. The first was at nine weeks, to remove a congenital cataract in her left eye. The second was for strabismus, commonly known as lazy eye.

"It was then I realized a lot of children were nervous," as she'd been, Lillian told me. "I started giving toys to the children at the hospital to ease their minds. A few years later, I wanted to reach more children," and thus Vision For and From Children was born. "The more time I spent at the hospital, the more I learned that not every child in need of care is as fortunate to have access to it."

Lillian diplomatically deflects questions about how much money her organization has raised.

"It's not about how much money you raised," she said. "It's about how many children get the gift of sight so they can see the sun and the moon and the stars."

She estimates that Vision For and From Children has helped provide eye care to 24,100 children in the U.S. and from countries such as Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Ukraine.

The newest fundraising campaign on her website, visionforandfromchildren.org, aims to raise \$1 million in one-dollar bills to build ophthalmology clinics in developing countries.

Dr. Brian Campolattaro, who performed both of Lillian's surgeries, said he has done 200 surgeries pro bono on behalf of her organization.

"I partner with doctors in the host countries so they can get proper follow-up care," he said, referring to the child patients. "When we travel to these countries, we teach the doctors in those countries to operate."

Since locations in poorer countries often don't have proper medical equipment, Vision For and From Children also helps pay for children to come to the U.S. for surgery. Failure to operate on cataracts such as Lillian's can lead to blindness.

"I think she has a real sense of community and empathy," Dr. Campolattaro said. And she has had "such a wonderful result," he said, referring to Lillian's own surgeries, "that she wants the same result for them. She has 20/20 vision in an eye that would have been blind 20 or 30 years ago."

All of this sounded great, but it left one large question unanswered. Between running her charity, accepting awards, speaking at schools and appearing on panels, when does Lillian, an eighth grader, find time for homework?

"A lot of people ask me, 'Can you do it all?'" she acknowledged. "It fits. It's a good combination." She said she also dances and is on her school's basketball team.

"I play guard," Lillian explained modestly. "I'm there for defense. I don't do much of the shooting."

The teenager is finally old enough that this March, for the first time, she's been invited to accompany Dr. Campolattaro and his team to the Dominican Republic to watch the results of her dedication in action. "I fund that mission every year," she explained.

I assumed that, if her parents gave her permission, she'd be traveling on her spring break, but she said the four-day trip occurs before then. "I'm not going to be missing school," she said. "There are parent-teacher conferences that day."

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