

Give-a-lot couple share the benefits of success

Margaret and David Allis have been working to make the world a better place since they met in 1982. The young Christian newly-weds moved to Otara, then India, to work with the poor. Today, as the owners of a successful small local business, they maintain a modest lifestyle and generously donate surplus profits to good causes. They spoke to Maire Vieth.

David and Margaret Allis have given away more than \$1.5 million to national and international charitable causes over the last eight years. In 2010, they decided they were making enough money, and could give some away.

They found their house was big enough to accommodate a large family and small home business, the old Toyota van still ran well, and lettuces, spinach, beetroot and strawberries grew abundantly in the backyard. They don't go out to eat a lot.

But they've retained some home comforts. The Allises have an espresso machine in the kitchen and a spa pool on the deck. They even plan the occasional trip to Europe, where their son John (26) lives.

But trendy fashion labels and home renovations are absent in the cosy Allis home. David likes to wear ethical fashion and Margaret likes to shop second-hand. "In general, we try to reduce what we spend on ourselves," David says.

Margaret and David have created a somewhat unusual model for their business, Barcodes New Zealand, which sells barcodes to be used on retail products.

"Around 10 years ago, we said we were happy to get a salary from the business, but that we would give future profits above that away," David says.

"So we locked in the giving away by putting the business into a charitable trust, knowing that once money is in your pocket, it is so much harder to let go of."

The IRD didn't like the arrangement at first. "They think you need to run a business to make a profit. We feel you can run a social business to provide employment and to give money away," David says.

The business, which employs four people part-time and David full-time, is owned by the Kings Trust (a charitable trust).



Happy to give... Margaret and David Allis

Last year, the trust donated more than \$90,000 to charities, mostly to combat the effects of malaria and worms on children in developing countries.

In August 2017, another \$3000 was donated to launch national speech competition Just Talk, in which New Zealand high school students are encouraged to discuss social-justice issues.

More than 150 students (including two from Takapuna Grammar) from 60 schools competed for the prize, which is split equally between the winning student, their school and a charity of choice.

The Allises are also behind smaller local projects. During Devonport's Santa Parade, they ran an ethical Christmas Market at Devonport Community House. Earlier in the year, they screened movies on the international drug trade and fashion, at Devonport Community House.

It's a joint mission. David comes up with most of the ideas and pushes them forward, but it's only because he and Margaret are on the same page that it has worked so long and so well.

The couple met through a mutual Devonport friend, 36 years ago. Margaret was a physiotherapist and had grown up in Devonport. David was an engineering student who had come to visit on his motorbike.

Both came from Anglican families but

had felt on the periphery at church since their teens. "It was more of a counter-cultural thing. Not that our families were bad or wrong at all, but both of us were looking for a deeper purpose in life," says David.

The two immediately connected. They had read *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* by evangelical theologian and social activist Ron Sider, independently. The book is about the alleviation of poverty worldwide. Both wanted to move away from materialism. "I guess we felt privileged, but asked ourselves what for?" David says.

They married a year later and sold their wedding gifts at a garage sale. The money went towards sewing machines for people in the Philippines.

The plan was to head to India with a Christian mission. But they needed theological training and local experience first. Margaret and David both enrolled at Bible College in Henderson for a year. "We didn't actually want a theological qualification, and did the minimum time we could get away with because we were in a hurry to do what we wanted to do," David says.

In 1985, the young couple bought a house in Otara and joined a local Pentecostal church, where they helped looking after at-risk children.

During the week, David worked at Fisher & Paykel and Margaret at Middlemore Hospital, until their first two children, Amelia (30) and

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Joseph (29) were born.

The young family left for Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) in 1990, to work as part of the mission Urban Leadership Foundation, working with a small team of seven. Their third child, John (26) was born there.

Kolkata was known as the “graveyard of missions,” and lived up to its reputation, David says. Both work and family life were hard-going.

“We employed someone to do a mapping project of the different ethnic groups and found two small churches in the slums of six million people.

“The theory of our development work was to increase trust among people to improve their ability to develop business. The practice was hard, but there is some good stuff happening in Kolkata now that we maybe were a small part of then,” David says.

Margaret says raising three children without any family help in India was something they couldn’t handle for more than three years. Eating was a big issue, for example. “The children and I always ate at home and had our own food and water. But David was about 20kg lighter when we got back home,” she says.

In 1992, the Allises returned to New Zealand and moved to Devonport to be near Margaret’s parents. “We looked at the four cheapest houses in Devonport and bought one of them,” David says. They spent \$140,000 on a two-bedroom bungalow on a big Handley Ave section.

For the next 15 years, David worked a minister for the Equippers Church, an apostolic church in Auckland’s CBD. He ran a bible college and an alternative education programme for long-term truants and kids who had dropped out of school, which grew quickly across nine Auckland communities, received Ministry of Education funding and

still runs citywide today as Creative Learning Scheme.

By 1998, the Allises had five children, including Tim (23) and Luke (20). They sold the bungalow and built a bigger house on the back section. Esther (15) was born five years later.

Margaret was putting her energy into Narrow Neck Playcentre. It ultimately shifted the family’s faith, she says. “We saw Playcentre as the sort of community that churches should be.”

In 2004, the Allises started a ‘house church’ at their home and ran it for 12 years, with the help of three other North Shore families.

“It was a really simple church where you could just turn up, have coffee and talk.

“It was unstructured, creative and the kids liked it as well. Everyone had something to offer and all questions were acceptable, many of which you couldn’t ask at church,”

“We feel you can run a social business to provide employment and to give money away.”

Margaret says.

These days, the couple attends Devonport’s Holy Trinity Church.

Soon after, David started his first small-business venture – selling unicycles from home. “The kids had got into unicycling. I had no background in business at all. But the idea of learning how to run one somehow

made sense,” he says.

“It went quite well for a while, and grew until I supplied unicycles to 120 schools. Then the Warehouse and Trade Me started selling them cheap and there was no longer a market for us.”

In 2006, he kicked off a second business idea – the educational family game Kiwi Quiz.

“Margaret and I had bought an educational question-and-answer game for the kids and we didn’t like it,” he says. The idea for a better alternative was sparked.

“Basically, Kiwi Quiz is like Trivial Pursuit without the board, the trivia and the categories. There are four different levels of difficulty of New Zealand-related questions, so it’s a mixed-ability game for the whole family,” he says.

A first print run of 2500 sold quickly and got the attention of Whitcoulls and Paper Plus, which is when David’s most successful business idea yet was born.

“Whitcoulls wanted barcodes, which turned out to be quite expensive. You had to join an organisation for \$600 per year and then you could buy 100 barcodes. But I needed only two. So I did some asking around and then decided to start selling them myself, individually,” he says.

The business soon expanded to Australia and, nine years ago, into Europe. “There are about 60 companies like us worldwide, most of them American. But we were the first that started selling in places like the UK, Ireland, South Africa, India, Singapore and Hong Kong and we grew really well,” he says.

Five years ago, David franchised his barcode business internationally. “People don’t pay us any money up front. They only pay us for the bar codes they sell, after they have sold them. I want it to do well and help and be good for people,” he says.

With both businesses going strong, David’s mind has found room for other ideas as well. Six years ago, he started the Devonport Locals Facebook page as a local community-building initiative.

“I moderate it as little as possible. I approve posts before they go up and often don’t even look at the responses after that,” he says.

“If people raise an issue, I occasionally delete comments or block people, but I’m pretty light on it.”

Then last winter, after youngest daughter Esther (15) had delivered a speech at school, David read a book about the value of competition. He decided to kick off a national speech contest for schools.

All the Allis kids had given speeches at Vauxhall, Belmont Intermediate and Takapuna Grammar schools. “Often on issues like poverty and I thought, yes, it was an influential part of their upbringing.

“I thought if there was a way to channel kids towards more meaningful speech topics than homework, uniforms or the Kardashians, this one could work.”

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