

THE Mother Teresa OF DETROIT

By Jim Jabara

A Detroit homemaker with no experience in community activism, Irene Auberlin was inspired by a child victimized by war to establish a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing medicines, supplies, and equipment to sick and poor people around the world.

One November night in 1953, four months after the end of the Korean War, Irene Auberlin and her husband, Lester, were settled in their Detroit home, watching the nightly news. A story titled “The Navy’s Baby” came on, about a group of U.S. sailors who had found an infant abandoned in an alley in the South Korean city of Inchon. They brought the child back to their ship and nursed him back to life. Eventually, they took him to a local orphanage for extended care and adoption.

The dire conditions at the orphanage as depicted on TV moved Irene to action. The next day, she wrote a letter to the Navy, seeking the facility’s address. Less than a month later, she received a reply from Rutherford Poats, a Tokyo-based correspondent for the United Press International, directing

Facing page: Lester and Irene Auberlin pose outside the relief organization she founded in 1953. This page, right: The abandoned baby who inspired Irene was rescued by U.S. sailors in Inchon, South Korea. All images courtesy of World Medical Relief.

her to the Star of the Sea Orphanage. The orphanage had been bombed and gutted during the 1950 invasion of Inchon and had only been partially rebuilt at that time.

After getting the address, the Auberlins sent the money they usually spent on Christmas cards and gifts to the orphanage. Soon after, Irene received a letter of gratitude from its director, Sister Philomena, who described the difficult conditions under which the children lived. Many



were the unwanted offspring of American GIs and Korean women. With few prospects for adoption, the children were becoming a challenge to care for.

Sister Philomena's letter sent Irene into high gear. She started collecting items of all kinds to ship to the facility: clothing, furniture, beds, infant formula, and medicine. This was the start of a charity drive that would last to this day.

WJR Offers Assistance

To solicit those first supplies, Irene ran an ad in *The Michigan Catholic* newspaper that read in part, "WANTED—Persons of all ages willing to invest money here to gain a hundredfold in Heaven. All investments guaranteed. Earthly dividends are the thanks of orphans in Inchon, Korea."

Lorene Babcock of WJR radio offered to help, sharing the story of the orphanage and the charity effort over the air. Listeners contributed in heartwarming ways. One woman organized a baby food block project. Others donated cash; the sum of two dollars a month could work wonders. Clubs also adopted the orphanage as a special project.

In December 1954, just a year after she had made her first contribution, Irene sent more than 12 tons of blankets, baby beds, hospital supplies, soap, diapers, and other items to the

facility.

Irene was briefly discouraged from requesting donations when she was informed that a local ordinance required her to have a solicitation permit. She applied for it in January 1955 and received it the next month. This was the first time that the city had issued a permit to an individual.

By 1956, Irene had developed a system of donations and deliveries going to clinics and mission hospitals at multiple locations in Asia and in Africa as well. She still received goods at her home, where she and Lester sorted them. The items were then sent to a temporary warehouse on Warren Avenue from which they were shipped. The \$100/month rent for the warehouse was paid by her husband. A Detroit auto dealer named Floyd Rice and his truck lot salesman, Henry McGladder, donated a pickup truck for her use one day a week. George Gabor, a Korean War veteran and student at the University of Detroit, became a volunteer driver.

Growing Pains

By 1957, World Medical Relief needed its own warehouse and office space. Rents were high at the time, but Irene was able to locate affordable space in the upstairs of a building at 922 Cherry Street, in Detroit's Corktown neighborhood. This gave the organization the needed room to sort, pack,

and store the many donated goods and supplies that were flowing in.

There was also room for a repair shop, where Irene put retired mechanics to work on medical equipment slated for retirement. "What I want to do is make this work nationwide," she explained. "Every large city should have an autonomous group gathering the drugs doctors and hospitals are not using and the equipment they have in their 'surplus' rooms."

When problems arose, Irene was quick to respond. At one point, shipments going through New York City were backed up on a regular basis, and some never reached their destination. Irene flew to Washington, D.C. to resolve the issue, securing a promise from the State



Michigan First Lady Lenore Romney (standing, far right) was among the visitors to WMR's free pharmacy for Detroit's neediest residents.



Above: World Medical Relief airlifted supplies to Haiti after 1963's Hurricane Flora. Below: WMR's Corktown warehouse solved the organization's growing need for sorting, packing, and storage space.

Department that all future shipments going to Asia would be routed through the San Francisco military shipping office.

In September 1958, World Medical Relief got a big public relations boost when Dr. Tom Dooley—a physician famous for his humanitarian work in Southeast Asia—visited the organization to request medicine for missions. By this time, only five years after Irene had started WMR, she and her volunteers had sent almost 200 tons of medical and dental supplies to countries in need around the world. As she pointed out in a newspaper interview, “We have outfitted clinics on every continent except Australia.”

In October of that year, she accepted the World Mission Award, presented by Bishop Fulton Sheen at the annual meeting of the U.S. Mission Sending Societies. Despite this outward sign of success, times were not easy for the organization and, in the fall of 1959, it was on the brink of closing.

The Charity Needs Charity

At the time, World Medical Relief had \$100,000 worth of drugs and \$80,000 worth of surgical instruments and hospital equipment in storage. It was supporting missionaries in 41 countries and received between eight and 10 new requests for help each day. There were 150 volunteers sorting medical supplies, including its founder, who did not draw a salary. Though nearly everything WMR received was free, it was not making enough in cash donations to pay the salaries of critical full-time employees.

Irene used the media to spread the word, noting that “World Medical Relief is so successful that it will be flat

broke before the month is over.” Help came in the early months of 1960, when the Guild of St. Luke, a society of physicians and nurses, agreed to sponsor WMR. Membership fees and the proceeds from a large charity ball were dedicated to supporting the organization's operating costs.

Having righted its financial ship, WMR had the means to embark upon a new project: collaborating with the people of Detroit to establish a 25-bed hospital in West Kingston, Jamaica. Squadron VA 732 of the Naval Air Station Grosse Ile provided the magic carpet, flying the goods aboard an R5D transport plane.

WMR expanded aid efforts to 65 countries in less than 10 years.

In recognition of this fact, Irene received the Lane Bryant Award: a special honor given to one person in the United States each year who, serving without thought of recognition, worked toward the improvement of human life. In 1963, she received the “Women Who Care” Golden Heart, a tribute to those who worked without pay.

New Building, New Challenges

By 1966, equipment and supplies were being donated faster than WMR could store or process them. At one point, over 100 shipment requests were waiting for fulfillment. Irene pleaded with the Detroit business community to donate a second building to the organization, but nothing panned out. The decision was then made to buy an eight-story warehouse located at 12th Street (now Rosa Parks Boulevard) and Webb Street. The price was \$80,000; retail magnate S.S. Kresge agreed to



pay half, but Irene and her loyal supporters were responsible for the rest.

Shortly after the new building was occupied, Irene faced an unexpected challenge. On July 23, 1967, a race riot broke out in Detroit and quickly spread into the area around World Medical Relief's headquarters. As buildings blazed, a state of emergency was declared and the National Guard was called in to help stop the destruction.

It was rumored that the 12th Street warehouse was targeted, so Irene and Lester moved into the warehouse to discourage any damage.

Irene offered the authorities the use of the building for their work, and the eighth-story roof became a prime lookout for arsonists. After the riot was over, the Auberlins continued to live there.

Irene faced another challenge in 1967, this time in Lansing. With so much poverty in Detroit, she decided to start a free pharmacy for those in need. She hired a pharmacist to oversee volunteers in dispensing donated medicines.

Concerned about product safety and professionalism, the state pharmacy board tried to shut her down. But Irene fought back, bringing in independent evaluators from the Food and Drug Administration.

She eventually won her battle; World Medical Relief still operates this prescription program for Detroit's low-income and uninsured residents.

Loss of Its Leaders

After 20 years of ably assisting his wife with WMR—even rising to the role of secretary of the organization—Lester Auberlin suffered a stroke and was unable to return to work. In 1974, he experienced a massive brain hemorrhage and died with Irene by his bedside.

Irene passed away in 1999 at the age of 102, after devoting



In a tribute delivered shortly after Irene Auberlin's death in 1999, U.S. Senator Spencer Abraham called her "the Mother Teresa of Detroit."

nearly half her life in service to others.

In her lifetime, she received more than 50 awards for her humanitarian efforts, including the Volunteer Action Award from President Ronald Reagan. More importantly, World Medical Relief, the organization Irene started in her living room 60 years ago, is going strong. Managed by a small paid staff, it continues to attract hundreds of volunteers who are inspired by the lifesaving results of their work.

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