



A FORCE FOR GOOD

GEORGE LUCAS'S CHARITY EFFORTS PUT HIS MONEY WHERE HIS HEART IS: **IN EDUCATION AND INSPIRATION.**

WORDS BY **KATE TREMILLS** | PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BRUCE TALBOT**

Movies and money aren't the only things George Lucas makes. The empire he began with the 1977 blockbuster *Star Wars* has since grown into several companies employing thousands and advancing technological innovations that may finally be as lasting a contribution to the art and business of filmmaking as any film Lucas has made.

This groundbreaking innovator has also made a point of "giving back," in a series of educational charity efforts as visionary as his science fiction creations.

"I am simply trying to struggle through life," Lucas once famously pronounced, "trying to do God's bidding."

At the heart of Lucas's efforts is a strong desire to improve the world for children. He does this in two key ways: charity film premieres that benefit nonprofit organizations across the U.S. and his own George Lucas Educational Foundation (GLEF).

"My own experience in public school was quite frustrating," Lucas has recalled. "I was often bored. Occasionally, I had a teacher who engaged my curiosity and motivated me to learn. Those were the

teachers I really loved. I wondered, 'Why can't school be exciting all of the time?'"

Among the beneficiaries of Lucas' largesse is Development for the Alliance for Education, an organization dedicated to educational reform. Rodney Wheeler, the non-profit's Senior Vice President, attributes a part of Lucas' motivation to becoming a parent himself. "Once you have a child you start thinking about what kind of a world they are in, what kind of community, what kind of schools," Wheeler says. "I think that's a natural life evolution for most of us. [Lucas] certainly is no exception. He has resources to do something about it, which is really wonderful. He doesn't just give money. He speaks. He advocates. He takes a personal point of view. It's very credible."

Leveraging his notoriety and influence, Lucas created his first major philanthropic effort, the George Lucas Educational Foundation (GLEF). Initially an R&D foundation, GLEF now focuses on discovering and disseminating information about cutting-edge education efforts.

"What we're dealing with here is humans and human brains—children," Lucas has said. "They don't respond well to being put on an assembly



RODNEY WHEELER, THE NON-PROFIT'S SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, ATTRIBUTES A PART OF LUCAS' MOTIVATION TO BECOMING A PARENT HIMSELF. "ONCE YOU HAVE A CHILD YOU START THINKING ABOUT WHAT KIND OF A WORLD THEY ARE IN, WHAT KIND OF COMMUNITY, WHAT KIND OF SCHOOLS... THINK THAT'S A NATURAL LIFE EVOLUTION FOR MOST OF US."

line. They respond well to other people. Nothing will ever compete with that. One human being having human contact with another human being is the most powerful force."

The current Executive Director of GLEF, Milton Chen, explains how Lucas constantly strives to make a difference.

"One of the metaphors that George uses in his own work is that he likes to run down the path more quickly than others and then come back and tell you what he's seen," Chen says. "That's what he has done with filmmaking and the use of technology. That's also what we're trying to do. We're trying to show what we hope schools will look like ten years from now. We are trying to give people the tools sometimes George refers to them as the weapons to being able to make this change."

Of course, Lucas knows that no matter how thrilling school can be, at its best, nothing can compare to the excitement around his films. He's turned each of the recent *Star Wars* releases into a bonanza for nonprofits by facilitating charity premieres. Lucasfilm executives evaluated applications from numerous nonprofit organizations and, with Lucas's assistance, selected ten finalists to view the latest *Star Wars* film one week before the wide release.

These charity premieres don't just generate buzz for Lucas and his films. In fact, they're primarily huge publicity and fundraising opportunities for the organizations. Lucasfilm provides the organizations with guidelines, support and the theater, but each group creates an event that suits their mandate and their community.

Being chosen as one of the ten agencies is tantamount to being blessed by Yoda himself. The benefits go far beyond just money. Alexandra Morgan, the CEO of Koret Family House, an organization that provides free temporary housing for children who have cancer and other serious illnesses and their families, explains that "for somebody of George Lucas's stature to say to a small agency like ours, 'I would like to do something to help you,' is huge. It sparks everyone's imagination. It gives everybody something really happy to look forward to. It's like dropping a dry sponge into a bucket of water. Every single bit of it gets soaked up and saturated."

Chris Whatney, director of communications for the Colorado Children's Campaign, a nonprofit organization that assists millions of children by providing healthcare, education, and support, emphasizes that groups are chosen based on their efforts, not on how they fit into a PR strategy.

"The staff at Lucasfilm said, 'We did not pick cities for this film, we picked organizations.' I thought that said a lot. They didn't pick their marketing strategy and then work to figure out some stuff around it.

They picked organizations they cared about and then made it happen in those cities."

000 : mpm : jun : jul

By initiating these events, Lucas not only helps the organizations but changes the lives of individual children. Alexandra Morgan explains that Lucas "makes it possible for 10 percent of the seats at the premiere to be given to low-income sick children. If I could tell you the spirit that that infuses into a sick child's life! When you see a kid's face who has a brain tumor and they know that they're going to go to a *Star Wars* premiere and they're going to meet George Lucas. It's equivalent to climbing Mt. Everest for a weekend mountain climber."

Morgan elaborates on how Lucas's generosity and art inspired a child at the house.

"Joey Laskowski—he has deep cancer and a liver condition now. He and his family are coming to the *Star Wars* premiere. [Joey] wanted to know all the details. This is the kind of stuff that helps kids imagine what it's like to be well."

Deb Campbell, a board member of Koret Family House, shares how Lucas changed the life of her son, Chris Caughron, who died from leukemia in 2001. "We all have a thread in our lives that carries us through. George Lucas and *Star Wars* allowed Chris to be a little kid and a big kid at the same time. And deal with the fear of what was coming up."

Lucas's mythology inspires children and charity staff alike. Sharon Gelman, executive director of Artists for a New South Africa (ANSA), an organization that works to support AIDS orphans in Africa and South Africa, draws the parallel between the *Star Wars* saga and the ongoing saga of Africa..

"It's such a wonderful, magical story," she says, "about the battle of good and evil. And the battle of people who seek freedom and justice over people who seek to repress and control. It's a great metaphor and mythology to be connected to. It's a mythology that fits South Africa's quest for freedom."

Alexandra Morgan sums up Lucas' generosity of spirit. "They don't call it 'show art.' They call it show *business* for a reason. When people like George Lucas use that influence to do good, it's awe-inspiring. There's a wide variety of agencies benefiting children that will receive much-needed funds and publicity. This is a guy who gets it. If you think about it, it's a very elegant and simple way to make a huge impact."

Most impressive, perhaps, is that Lucas doesn't expect a photo opportunity from his charity efforts. He simply puts the tools in the hands of people who can make the widest impact. In his company, at his foundation, and beyond, George Lucas has proven himself a powerful philanthropic force. - MPM

INDEED, THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A MOVIE DEAL THAT ENDED UP SO LOPSIDEDLY IN FAVOR OF THE FILMMAKER

