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Philanthropy in Hollywood

8:14 AM PDT 10/14/2010 by Todd Longwell, AP

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Writer-director Paul Haggis in Haiti

Actress Patricia Richardson is perched atop a stack of drywall in an unfinished kitchen of a townhouse in Lynwood, Calif., on a hazy June day, trying to do her part for Habitat for Humanity of

Greater Los Angeles' sixth annual Power Women Power Tools build. She used to build sets back in college and even worked on a previous Habitat build in 1994 for a special episode of her series "Home Improvement." But as she stares down the latest in a long string of drywall screws, cordless drill in hand, it's clear that her construction skills aren't what they used to be.

"I've been in this room for probably an hour, trying to tighten these screws in the wall and sort of missing," says Richardson, trying to laugh off her frustration. "(Habitat has) a class where you can go and get some building skills and since I'm really rusty, maybe I need to take it."

With three children to raise, Richardson's philanthropic efforts had been largely confined to writing checks. But now that her youngest has graduated from high school, she's eager to take part in Habitat builds as often as she can. Yes, she's driven by a selfless desire to aid the organization's mission to provide affordable sustainable housing for needy families, but she's also drawn to the tactile fulfillment the work provides.

"This is really satisfying, physically," she says. "You're getting to do something and you see the result of the work."

Richardson is not alone in these sentiments. Increasingly, celebrities and other show business figures are going beyond posing on red carpets at benefit galas and getting actively, often physically, involved with their pet charitable causes, whether it be Brad Pitt working to build 150 sustainable, affordable homes in New Orleans' Ninth Ward through his Make It Right Foundation or U2's Bono buttonholing world leaders and asking them to forgive Third World debt or do more to fight AIDS in Africa.

Patricia Richardson

In the celebrity and civilian worlds, activism is often inspired by personal experience with

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illness, poverty or abuse. For Richardson, it was her late father's struggle with the neurodegenerative brain disease Progressive Supranuclear Palsy that led her to sign on as the national spokeswoman for CurePSP. In the case of actor John C. McGinley, best known as Dr. Perry Cox on "Scrubs," it was the 1997 birth of his son Max, who has Down syndrome, that moved him to take action.

Since 2006, McGinley has been the national spokesman for the National Down Syndrome Society's Buddy Walk, an annual program of 350 events across the country designed to raise money and awareness and help integrate the families of children with special needs into the community at large.

"A lot of people feel like they did something wrong when they have a child born with special needs, never mind that it's just a genetic anomaly," says McGinley, who typically participates in three walks a year. "Often the Buddy Walk is the first time families are coming out of their hall of shame. They can access all these resource kiosks about nutrition and different support groups and meet other families that are ready to love them."

McGinley has also been passionate spokesman for Spread the Word to End the Word, a national campaign launched last year by Special Olympics and Best Buddies asking people to pledge to stop using the word "retard" to describe people with intellectual disabilities. He's penned two editorials on the subject for the Huffington Post and lobbied for the passage of Rosa's Law, which strikes the word "retard" from the laws in Maryland. He has also publicly called Ben Stiller a "coward" for repeatedly using the "r-word" for comic effect in his 2008 film "Tropic Thunder."

McGinley admits he didn't give the "r-word" issue any thought before the birth of his son, but as producer Mark Gordon ("Grey's Anatomy") points out, "sometimes the philanthropic things we get involved in -- they choose us as opposed to us choosing them."

For Gordon, the selection process began 15 years ago, when an old family friend told him about his experience with Teach for America, a nonprofit organization that recruits recent college grads to teach in low-income areas around the U.S. The friend was in his first year teaching kindergarten in Compton, Calif., and the district didn't have enough money to supply him with crayons or paper. Shocked by his stories, Gordon got involved with Teach for America, eventually serving as its chairman of the board. In the ensuing years, he also served on the board of UCLA Lab School, which his daughters attended.

Inspired by the economic and cultural diversity at the school, Gordon decided that L.A.'s charter school system could use an institution with a similar mix of low-income and middle-class students from a wide spectrum of racial backgrounds. Since many charters schools often have a specific focus of study, whether math and science or film and theater, it was decided theirs would focus on giving back to the community, locally and globally, hence the name Citizens of the World Charter School. It will open in September with 120 students in kindergarten and first grade.

Gordon says details of the "giving back" curriculum are still being determined, but he is confident that "if you can get them when they're young, you have a much better chance that they'll grow into adults that we hope they will become."

The future is more tenuous for the youth targeted by Artists for Peace and Justice, a nonprofit founded by writer-director Paul Haggis in 2009. Although its long-term mission is to address issues of poverty and disenfranchisement around the world, its immediate goal is to build schools in the poorest areas of Haiti, and provide hot meals, clean drinking water and regular medical treatments to the children living there. Working with Father Rick Frechette, an American doctor who has worked in the slums of Port-au-Prince for more than two decades, the organization started small, sponsoring "street schools" in the Cite Soleil slum. Then on Jan. 12, the 7.0 earthquake hit Haiti. Within five days, Haggis had flown down to Haiti on a rented cargo plane along with actors Sean Penn and Maria Bello and Dr. Reza Nabavian, who is now the co-chair of APJ.

"When we got there, they were just having to amputate limbs because of the infection," Haggis recalls. "Dr. Nabavian started our relief facility there immediately and he was able to do skin grafts and save so many arms and legs."

Thanks to worldwide media coverage, APJ was able to raise \$7 million in the wake of the quake, which it has used to fund a variety of humanitarian initiatives, including the delivery of millions of dollars worth of food to the island and a new pediatric rehab center for the children who lost limbs.

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On reflection, Haggis says he's not sure what initially drew him to Haiti, other than a simple curiosity about life in the slums. But he knows what keeps what keeps his passion going.

"Once I got in the slums and I met those people who had nothing and had been so ill-treated and saw them smile, I took such joy from that," Haggis says. "It's selfishness on my part. I love feeling that joy."

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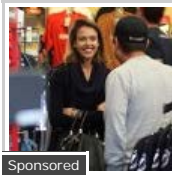
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