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A Banker's Gift Spurs Blind Entrepreneur's Vision

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A sales assistant helping a customer select a watermelon at Lighthouse, whose startup capital was a donation. **Vladimir Filonov**

"I used to think, what can the blind do? But then they fixed my back," said Sergei Ogarkov, finance manager of the Lights of the Lighthouse, a grocery store in northern Moscow.

Ogarkov is talking about blind masseurs who after three sessions eliminated back pain that he had endured for 15 years.

The Lights of the Lighthouse, too, is not a simple grocery store. It's a man's dream, however small, to help those who cannot see.

The man's name is Nikolai Litvinov. He is blind.

"People look at him with a jaundiced eye," Ogarkov said of Litvinov, who is also general director of the store and the man who came up with the name for it.

"We live our lives as if it were a sea. And in Russia it is also a stormy sea, hence the name," Litvinov said.

The grocery store is a byproduct of Litvinov's brainchild — a medical center for blind masseurs that would serve as a form of occupational therapy for the blind and help them earn a living.

Litvinov dreamed for about 15 years about creating the center, until he turned to former banker Marlen Manasov in hopes of raising money for his cause.

Manasov had known Litvinov for a long time, and used his help to assemble a team of blind and sighted computer programmers to create a special program for stock exchange traders.

Litvinov came to Manasov again about six months ago with a business plan to execute on his dream, which Ogarkov helped him draft.

According to the plan, the medical massage center was to cost 2 million rubles ($72,000) and employ five sighted doctors and 10 trained blind masseurs.

Manasov, whom friends call a shy and generous man, was in the process of ending his banking career in Russia in order to focus on a project of his own — doing business in Cuba, which he hopes will, after the fall of communism, become a land of opportunity for entrepreneurs.

Busy with his plans and supporting several causes, Manasov said he would help Litvinov one last time and gave him about a half of the sum he needed to open the center.

The rest he would have to find on his own.

"You can just give someone a fish or you can hand them a fishing rod and show them how to fish," Manasov said in a telephone interview. "And this is the kind of man [Litvinov] is."

Manasov has an eye for spotting promising people and projects.

A gifted businessman, he helped found Downside Up, a nonprofit organization that assists parents raising children with Down syndrome and raises awareness of the illness in Russia.

Manasov founded the organization 12 years ago along with his colleague Jeremy Barnes from UBS Brunswick and others. Today, it is the only NGO in Russia exclusively focused on the illness.

Litvinov did not want Manasov's final 32,000 euro ($45,000) donation to sit idly in his pocket. He came up with a new business plan to create the Lights of the Lighthouse, a small grocery store whose eventual profits would allow him to open the massage center staffed by blind masseurs.

The store broke even after only about two months of work.

Litvinov says that once the Muscovites start coming back from their summer houses and vacations to faraway lands, demand will grow and he will be able to start saving up for a

packaging facility where more blind workers, using their heightened sense of touch, will be able to make a living.

Litvinov hopes that by end of September he will be able to put away about 10 percent of the monthly turnover, and eventually hire 10 blind people.

Meanwhile, the dream of the massage center has been put on hold as he tries to find sponsors.

"Soon we will be approaching the World Bank. Maybe they can help us," Litvinov said hopefully.

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