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Expat U.S. Banker Records for Soldiers

By Alli Rath

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Robins

Gregg Robins is an American expat living in Moscow and working for UBS as head of wealth management in Russia. Robins grew up in the Bronx, New York, and eventually found his way to Oxford University where he earned a doctorate in management and a masters of philosophy in East European studies.

Robins, a classically trained clarinet player turned singer-songwriter, recently released an album entitled "Everything That Matters." Part of the proceeds from this album will be donated to HonorVet, an organization that provides support for past and present U.S. soldiers. Robins spoke with The Moscow Times about his experience with charity work and what makes this cause so special for him.

Q: What is the first charity you gave money to?

A: Growing up in a modest middle-class family in the Bronx, New York, I do not recall giving money to charities in my youth, though as I got older and began to make my own living, I

certainly did. Over the years, I also learned that giving one's time can be as valuable as giving one's money. One example, when I was turning 20 I was in India and spent my Christmas Day serving lunch to the people at Mother Theresa's Home for the Destitute and Dying. I also made a cash donation to them, but the time spent and interaction there was most meaningful. Another example is the hours and hours of volunteer work I did over a number of years as the treasurer and also president of my synagogue in New York.

Q: Did you volunteer as a teenager back home?

A: Not as a teenager, but in my early college years I did so with pleasure. One experience I remember in particular was reading books to make tape recordings for the blind. My grandmother suffered from deteriorating vision, and this was a cause close to my heart.

Q: Which charity is closest to your heart?

A: Supporting our troops returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I am a singer-songwriter, and using my song, "Heroes," I have teamed up with the organization HonorVet to raise awareness and funds for returning soldiers. What is often not understood is that for many soldiers, the return home is more difficult than the time they spend serving overseas. HonorVet is an organization that provides them with resources, support and a community.

Q: Does it feel strange to be supporting an American charity while living in Russia?

A: Not at all. I think the cause of honoring our soldiers who return from battle is a universal one, and that everyone should be aware of the tremendous challenges they encounter.

Q: What is the biggest difference between charity-giving in America and in Russia?

A: Charitable giving has long been a part of American culture. What's more, it is institutionalized through the Tax Code and charitable deductions. In Russia, charitable giving is at a much earlier stage, though it is clearly developing quite rapidly through a variety of activities and causes.

Q: What other charities are you involved in?

A: I have been involved with the Rotary organization, which channels funds to various charities. In fact, I myself benefited from a Rotary scholarship as a student, and over the years I have been a speaker for Rotary club events in a number of different countries. I have also supported both cancer research and diabetes research. Diabetes is a major health problem and one that has greatly affected my own family, as my late father suffered from it. So, it is a very personal cause for me.

Q: Do you give money to panhandlers you see on the street?

A: Yes. It is hard to imagine not doing this. But apart from money, I have always made an effort to offer food and meals where possible. I see this as a more direct way to provide support than by giving money, and perhaps stems from the fact that I was partially raised by my Depression-era Jewish grandparents: For them, wasting food was a sin and sharing it a blessing.

See www.greggrobins.com for more information about the Helping Our Heroes at Home initiative.

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