

By Andy Steiner

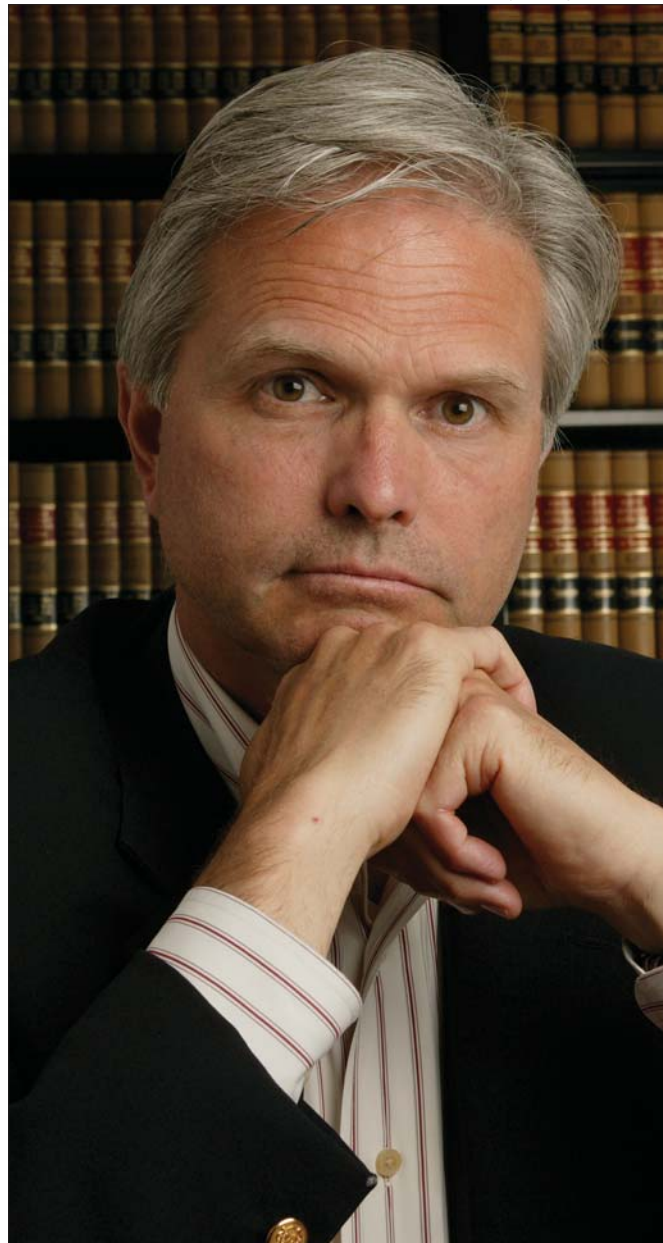
**I**N 1995, SCOTT HILLSTROM '84 was living an enviable life. Former managing partner of Hillstrom & Bale, a Minneapolis-based commercial law firm founded by his father, Robert Hillstrom '70, he was happily married with three young daughters. He and his brother Brad were flush with cash from the sale of Rehab One, the national rehabilitation physician network they founded in the late 1980s. Hillstrom, an avid traveler and fisherman, was looking forward to spending the next three years living with his family in New Zealand.

“From the first time I visited New Zealand, I always wanted to live in that part of the world,” Hillstrom says. “Then when I sold Rehab One, my wife and I agreed that we’d pack up the family and spend some serious time there. I didn’t have a plan beyond living in New Zealand for three years and establishing residency. Maybe I’d do some business while I was there. Maybe I’d travel. I wasn’t sure. I just wanted to fish,

TIM RUMMELHOFF

# A Man With a Mission

*As he lay bleeding on the roadside after a serious car accident, Scott Hillstrom '84 decided that if he survived, he would use his life to help others. Since then, he has developed a nonprofit organization that oversees franchised health clinics and pharmacies in Kenya, providing essential drugs and health care to hundreds of thousands of people.*



live my dream of spending as much time as possible in the most beautiful place in the world.”

Drunk on success and eager for more, Hillstrom was living the high life—or so he thought. Then everything changed.

## Divine Inspiration

In the fall of 1995, Hillstrom was in New Zealand on a house-hunting trip. While driving around the island, he had a head-on collision with another vehicle on a remote mountain road. While the other driver ran off to call an ambulance, Hillstrom lay helpless and bleeding on the roadside. He knew it would take at least an hour for an ambulance to arrive.

“I didn’t know how badly I was injured,” Hillstrom recalls. “When you’re in that shape, you’re in shock. You don’t actually feel pain, and you really don’t know what is wrong with you. I knew I was having a lot of difficulty breathing, and there was a lot of blood. My body was shaking—I think from shock—and I was lying on this damp gravel road. There was a cold breeze blowing, so I knew that hypothermia was a risk. I could think of several ways I might not last long.”

Instead of panicking, Hillstrom says he felt an unworldly sense of calm wash over him.

“Most of us have had the experience where we have a close call,” he says. “Usually it happens when you are driving and almost have an accident. By the time you realize you might have killed yourself, you’re safe again,” he says. “In this instance I could think about the possibility that I could be gone in 10 minutes or an hour or tomorrow. I was perfectly lucid. Believe me; life seemed quite real at that moment.”

As the minutes passed, Hillstrom took time to review his life. What he realized, he says, was this: Even though to the outside world his life looked perfect, it was missing something. If he died that night, he concluded, the world would be no better for his having been in it.

“At that moment, all of that hard work, the financial security, the status that comes with success amounted to nothing at all,” Hillstrom says. “It was a shock to my consciousness. I realized that the only thing that mattered was how I had influenced the lives of others.”

His “perfect” life, Hillstrom realized, was going in the wrong direction. If he made it out alive, he made a promise to God that he was going to dedicate the rest of his life to helping others.

This wasn’t exactly a deathbed conversion. Hillstrom had been a religious man for most of his life. He’d given generously to charity, regularly attended church, and even spent 10 years as CEO of Steiger International, an evangelical Christian youth

organization. Still, when he weighed the impact he had made on the world, Hillstrom concluded, “I had pretty much wasted my life.”

“It doesn’t matter if you are Bill Gates or Bill Clinton,” Hillstrom says he realized that night. “Things like money or power don’t mean anything at all when you get to the end of the road. What really matters is what you do with what you are given.”

Eventually help arrived, and when Hillstrom got to a hospital, doctors discovered that he wasn’t hurt nearly as badly as he had feared.

“I had some facial injuries and needed some stitches, and I had very severe bruising, but I did not have any lasting, debilitating injuries from that accident,” Hillstrom says. “So it turns out that I was given another shot at it. I resolved that the next time I faced death I was not going to go through the same realization that I wasted my life.”

## McDonald’s French Fries Spark Idea

Just before his fateful trip to New Zealand, Hillstrom had read an article about the health of children in the developing world.

“I read that 25,000 children die every day because they don’t have access to medicine that costs less than a cup of coffee,” Hillstrom says. “I used to think that

**“I realized** that wherever I’ve traveled around the world, a McDonald’s French fry tastes the same. I thought, ‘Why can’t we create the same uniformity with drug distribution?’”

most people in these countries can’t afford the medicine they need to help their children, but actually most of the poorest people in the world *can* afford the medicine necessary to save their child’s life from the most common diseases. They just can’t get their hands on it, or when they do, it has often been tampered with in some way or another.”

Because Hillstrom thought that maybe there was a reason he had read the article just before his life-altering accident, he made a trip to Kenya, where he met with Eva Ombaka, pharmaceutical adviser to the World Council of Churches and an expert in the field of essential drugs.

Essential drugs are, according to the World Health Organization, medicines that “satisfy the primary health care needs of the population.” Ombaka and others in her field work to improve the distribution of the drugs most needed by people in developing

nations—basic, low-cost remedies like antimalarials, antiparasitics, and antibiotics.

After talking with Ombaka and visiting villages and hospitals in rural Kenya, Hillstrom decided that he had found a worthy goal for his zeal: To develop a fair and effective system for getting essential drugs to the people—especially children—who need them most. By 1997, Hillstrom and Ombaka had formed Sustainable Healthcare Enterprise Foundation (SHEF), a non-profit organization dedicated to reaching that goal.

But how do you get drugs to the people who need them most? Basic life-saving medicines are available all over the developing world, Hillstrom explains, but the distribution is often muddled by corruption or slowed by heavy-handed governmental regulation. One day, as he was pondering a way to get beyond this dilemma, Hillstrom thought of one of his favorite snacks.

“I travel all over the world, and I like to eat McDonald’s French fries,” Hillstrom says, laughing. “I realized that wherever I’ve traveled around the world, a McDonald’s French fry tastes the same. I thought,



**On a trip to Kenya, Scott Hillstrom '84 met with a mother carrying her daughter who has Malaria. The mother had a prescription from a health clinic but no access to quality medicine. This incident inspired the formation of CFWshops.**

make a profit from a well-run business; Hillstrom and SHEF, which remains a strictly nonprofit enterprise, retain the right to remove franchise rights from store owners who water-down drugs, cheat patients, or otherwise exploit the system.

## Passionate Pursuit

There’s no doubt that Hillstrom is a man with a mission. People who’ve worked with him say it is evident in his focused, intent manner, in the passionate way he talks about his organization and the ambitious goals he has set for it.

Ward Brehm, nominated by President George W. Bush to the board of the African Development Foundation and a member of SHEF’s board of directors, says the first time he met Hillstrom he was struck by his “gentle, steely resolve.” Hillstrom, Brehm says, isn’t a run-of-the-mill do-gooder. He is one of those rare people whose sincerity comes through at first meeting. “From the start,” Brehm says, “it was clear to me that Scott had an honest passion and commitment to helping the poor of the world.”

Arnie Abens, a Minneapolis financial adviser and SHEF board member, says Hillstrom “is genuinely a very caring, compassionate man who always wants to do the right thing.”

Hillstrom was so dedicated to SHEF’s mission that he funded the organization out of his personal savings, Abens says. Hillstrom still draws no salary for his work. “Scott’s not in this for personal gain,” he says.

Not one to toot his own horn, Hillstrom explains that he is only trying to live a life that emulates his role model: “Jesus, who admonished us to do to others as we would have done to ourselves.” This

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‘Why can’t we create the same uniformity with drug distribution?’” Hillstrom realized at that moment that he wanted to create a system that resembled the McDonald’s franchising system, a profit-driven program that ensures product safety and reliability. “I went to a friend in New Zealand who owns some McDonald’s franchises, and I asked him, ‘How do you do that?’ He explained for me how the franchise business model works, and we adapted those principles to drug distribution. It was as simple as that.”

Today SHEF oversees a network of some 60 health clinics and pharmacies in rural Kenya, called CFWshops (CFW stands for Child and Family Wellness). At Kenyan CFWshops, franchise holders are trained health workers who can diagnose illnesses and deliver essential medicines to children and their families. Just like other franchisees, CFWshop owners

commitment to living a more godly life has its roots on a cold roadside in New Zealand, but in the years since it has only grown and deepened. Hillstrom has found his life's calling, he says, and though some may see SHEF's mission as insurmountably daunting, as far as he's concerned there's no other option.

"If I were laying in a dusty village in Africa, being consumed by the ravages of malaria, I would hope that someone would come to my aid," Hillstrom says. "The same can be said of everyone we encounter who suffers from disease and oppression which comprise most of what ails mankind here at home and around the world."

## Lawyers are People, Too

Hillstrom's father was a lawyer, so it would seem like a logical choice for his oldest son to follow him into the law. But Hillstrom left college at the University of Minnesota determined to strike out on his own. He took a job selling financial products for Bankers Life of Iowa. But a few years later, Hillstrom had changed his mind and decided to go into the family business. He chose William Mitchell because the range of night courses offered there made it possible for him to support his family while earning his J.D.

"I was very lucky there was a William Mitchell," Hillstrom says. "When I got out of college and I got married and started having kids, there was no way I could have afforded to go to law school during the day. Mitchell allowed me to become a lawyer in the first place."

At the start, Hillstrom settled into a comfortable position leading his father's established practice, but it didn't take long for him to realize that he needed to stir things up professionally in order to keep himself interested in his work. When his brother approached him with the idea that would one day become Rehab One, Hillstrom jumped at the opportunity to diversify his interests. Under Hillstrom's leadership (he served as Rehab One's managing director and general counsel), the company grew to employ over 200 people in several regions of the United States.

Hillstrom believes his legal training and experience were key to his ability to make Rehab One a success.

"Law school taught me how to think about issues from a clear perspective," he says. "Being a lawyer was valuable in operating a company built on contracts as we were able to make the contracts stick."

Once again, with SHEF, Hillstrom says he's used his "lawyer's way of parsing the world's problems" to develop a unique approach to combating sometimes-deadly diseases. "The first time I went to Kenya, I got off the plane never having been to Africa before," he says. "Because I am trained as a lawyer and have used the law to get to the bottom of an issue, it didn't take me long to find out what's at the core of this problem."

Hillstrom continues to use his legal skills as chief executive officer of his law firm Guardian Law Group, Minneapolis.

Abens says that working with Hillstrom has opened his eyes to the many different applications of a law degree. "It is amazing how people make fun of attorneys. After getting to know Scott and seeing firsthand what he's done with his education, I would be happy if every one of my kids got a law degree. Scott has an incredible way of thinking that he has developed through his years as a business attorney. That point of view has made him uniquely suited to solving world problems. The fact that he is an attorney is essential to the success of his organization."

Hillstrom believes there are many applications for the lessons learned in law school and real-world practice, and he hopes attorneys will continue to think of unique ways to apply their legal skills. "We're not just *lawyers*," Hillstrom says. "We're also *people*. The community we live in today is global, and if we as attorneys want to put our problem-solving skills to good use in the global community, we need to take our unique skills and apply them to the problems that exist in our world. ...As Margaret Mead once said, 'Never doubt that a small band of committed individuals can change the world.' That band of committed individuals can be us." ☒



Hillstrom's organization oversees a network of franchised health clinics and pharmacies called CFWshops, like this one, in rural Kenya.



Children are the primary mission of Hillstrom's Sustainable Healthcare Enterprise Foundation.