

Australian Rotarians rescue a life in Mongolia

BY PHILLIP HINTON

Hishigzul is a playful, robust two-year-old Mongolian girl. Her rosy cheeks and inquisitive eyes would certainly qualify her to be the star of a movie or a television program. In November 1994, however, she was experiencing severe heart problems. In a country lacking the necessary medical facilities to help her, Hishigzul's life seemed destined to be tragically brief. But thanks to links of friendship and service established by Australian and Mongolian Rotarians, she was able to have a sophisticated cardiac operation, and will now lead a fruitful, normal life.

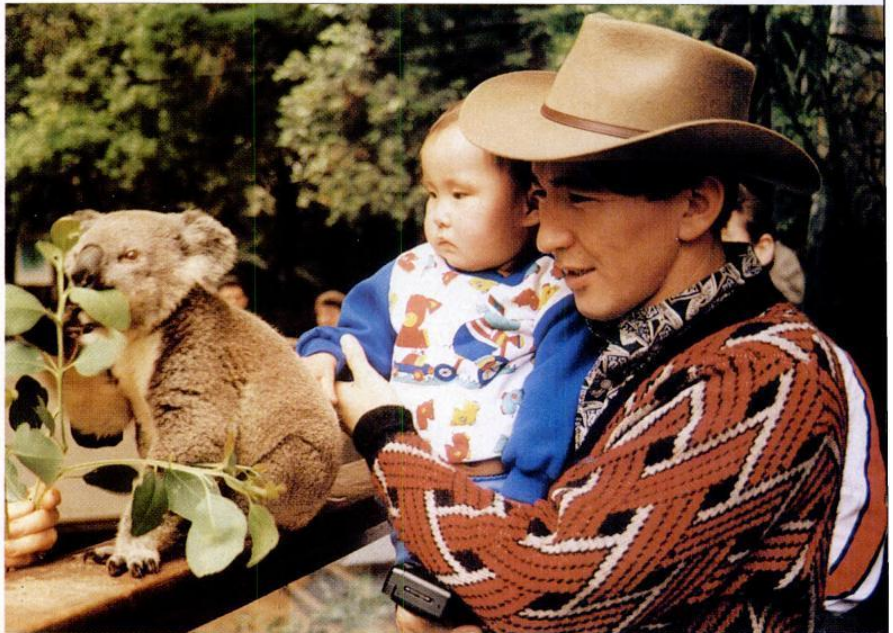
During the summer of 1994 my oldest son, Sean, rang me from UlaanBaatar, the capital of Mongolia, where he had lived for seven years. His newly formed tourism company was having its first profitable year, attracting many international visitors to Mongolia, a vast and fascinating country just recently opened to the West after almost 70 years of communist rule.

Sean asked me whether he should accept the invitation to join the [then provisional] Rotary Club of UlaanBaatar. A few weeks earlier, I had joined the Rotary Club of Wahroonga, N.S.W., Australia, and my enthusiasm was running high.

"Of course, you must join!" was my reply. So, Sean became a charter member of one of the newest and most far-flung clubs (chartered on 10 January 1995) in Rotary's worldwide family.

In September 1994, I visited Sean in Mongolia and "made up" at the luncheon meeting of the UlaanBaatar club. I was impressed by the openness, energy, and friendliness of the club members, but had no idea that we would soon join efforts in what became my baptism of fire in Rotary service.

In late March, Sean rang me again to relate a touching story. A man he had met three years earlier in the town of Khovd had called



Eager to explore Australia's fascinating fauna, a healthy and inquisitive Hishigzul pats a koala from the safety of her father's arms.

Sean's office, asking for an urgent meeting. Since that time, Enkhbat (Mongolians have only one name) had joined the police force, gotten married, and had a daughter, Hishigzul.

She was born with a congenital heart defect no hospital in Mongolia could treat. Unless she received expert treatment, Hishigzul might not live longer than a year, at best. As doctors later explained, her little heart had four holes. The point where the four chambers met was interconnected. She also had a split mitral valve and a narrowed pulmonary artery. She was starved for oxygen.

Enkhbat had gone to the local newspaper and even appeared on television appealing for help, but in Mongolia, where the average monthly income is about U.S. \$80, the money raised was a drop in the ocean. Perhaps, Enkhbat asked, Sean had friends in Australia who could save the little girl's life?

Thanks to Rotary, Sean certainly found the friends. He never could have guessed how many, and how spontaneous their response would be to his plea.

I took Hishigzul's case to our club president, Bob Quodding. Together with Rotarians Peter Weekes, director of the Sydney Adventist Hospital, and Alan Gale, chief cardiac surgeon of the same institution, we began to improvise a plan.

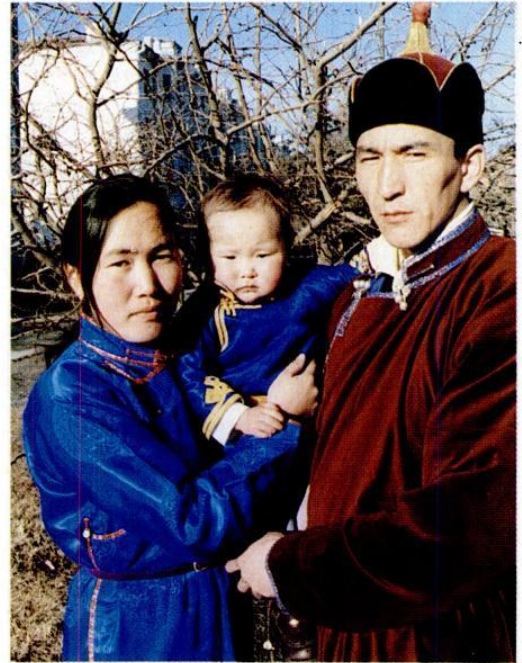
We approached 1994-95 District Governor Ivan Skellet. Within hours, we received a faxed copy of his appeal to all the clubs in R.I. District 9680. Funds began to flow in, but not only from Rotarians. We received the financial support of the Lane Cove Uniting Church, the Bahá'í Community of Hornsby, and several individuals and organizations. The Rotarians in UlaanBaatar were doing their bit, too. Generous contributions also arrived from the Rotary Club of Shatin in Hong Kong, a German company based in Mongolia, a Catholic mission, and even from the Australian Ambassador to Mongolia based in Beijing.

Sean came to Sydney. Two weeks later, we were able to call Enkhbat: "Come to Australia. We think we can help Hishigzul!"

Alan Gale challenged us: "Wouldn't it be a real bonus if we



Under the leadership of Ioan Skellet, 1994-95 governor of R.I. District 9680 (right), a veritable chain of efforts saved Hishigzul's life, who appears here with her father. Engineer John Kitchener (left) established a vital telephone link between Sydney and UlaanBataar.



Back in Mongolia, Hishigzul's reunited family displays their traditional, colorful attire: prussian blue for mother Altantsetseg and her daughter, ruby-ochre for a radiant Enkhbat.

could bring a Mongolian heart surgeon to observe the operation and study alongside Australian surgeons?"

Sean called Dr. Boldsaikhan, one of Mongolia's foremost cardiac surgeons. Two days later, Dr. Boldsaikhan and Enkhbat boarded a flight to Sydney, via Beijing, accompanying a tiny Mongolian girl, listless and lethargic. Most of the time she was too tired to play the games her father brought to amuse her.

Alan Gale was the speaker at our Wahroonga breakfast meeting the day before Hishigzul arrived from Mongolia. After the meeting he took a few of us aside: "You must understand this is a very risky procedure. There are no guarantees of success. We need some more tests. We may even decide it is too dangerous to operate. Be prepared."

We took our jet-lagged visitors to meet Dr. Gale, and then to the Children's Hospital at Camperdown. The tests showed Hishigzul's condition was even more complicated than first thought.

The surgeons then made their decision. On 26 April, Dr. Tim Cartmill operated on Hishigzul at the Children's Hospital. Assisted by

Dr. Gale and with Dr. Boldsaikhan in attendance, Dr. Cartmill reconstructed Hishigzul's heart in a five hour procedure.

The operation went well, and Hishigzul's fragile heart was strong enough to pull through the next critical hours. We nearly lost her several times during the following days. Her heart failed, and pleurisy and pneumonia set in. Then, as children often do, she suddenly rallied and there she was, a week after her surgery, sitting up in bed and eating the ice cream her smiling father offered her.

When Hishigzul was still in intensive care, the Mongolian Ambassador to Australia, Mr. Tsakhilgaan, visited her at the hospital. I shall never forget the sight of the burly Mongolian holding back tears at Hishigzul's bedside. He said, "Thank you and all the friends who helped this little Mongolian girl. This is a very significant act of friendship from your country to ours. I will never forget this kindness."

• *Phillip Hinton is a member of the Rotary Club of Wahroonga, N.S.W., Australia.*

Anniversary clubs

Two clubs were admitted to Rotary International in October 1920. A special salute to these clubs for their 75 years of service.

U.S.A.—Louisiana: Lafayette.
Maryland: Frederick.

Ten clubs were admitted to Rotary International in October 1945. Congratulations to these clubs on their 50 years of service.

Denmark: Kerteminde.
England: Garston (Liverpool);
Hatfield; Mendip.
Finland: Lappeenranta.
France: Chalon-sur-Saône.
Norway: Bergen.
Sweden: Lysekil.
U.S.A.—Kansas: Johnson;
Ohio: West Milton.

Working on water projects?

During 1995-96, the R.I. Board has set a goal for Rotary clubs and districts to provide 5,000 new water wells for communities worldwide.

If your club is participating in a water well project (or a water project of any kind), we would like to know. Share your story with the editors at: *THE ROTARIAN*, 1560 Sherman Ave., Evanston, IL 60201 U.S.A.