



# Naomi Segal-Bronstein

*Children's champion*

**N**aomi Segal-Bronstein likes to keep her priorities straight. The diminutive, Montreal-born activist has received numerous honours, including membership in the Order of Canada, for her work with children in developing countries, but she has never allowed the recognition to distract her from her cause.

When she received the \$250,000 Royal Bank Award for Canadian Achievement (presented to a Canadian who has made "a significant contribution

to human welfare and the common good") in 1997 and bank officials asked what she would like served at the dinner being given in her honour, she immediately suggested a simple meal of rice, a poignant reminder of the diet of most of the world's poorest children.

Although Segal-Bronstein eventually agreed to a less spartan menu, the incident typifies the single-mindedness she has applied to her cause – providing food, medical treatment and adoptive families for needy children in Asia and Central America – over

STYROS BOURBOULTS

three decades. “We estimate she has saved the lives of up to 30,000 children,” says Bryan Davies, a senior vice-president at the Royal Bank.

For Segal-Bronstein, working with children has been a long vocation. As a teenager, she ran an impromptu kids’ camp at her parents’ home in Val Morin, Que., and later served as a paediatric volunteer at two Montreal hospitals. At the age of 18, she married her high school sweetheart, Herb Bronstein, and within four years gave birth to three children.

In the late 1960s, as the Vietnam War escalated, Segal-Bronstein began to read about South Vietnam’s young outcasts, Amerasian children fathered by U.S. soldiers. The more she learned of them, the more she felt compelled to do something to help them. And so, in 1969, she and two other Montreal women, Sandra Simpson and Bonnie Cappuccino, formed Families for Children, a charitable organization with a dual purpose: to find families in North America to adopt abandoned Vietnamese children and to raise money and collect used equipment for orphanages in South Vietnam. Says Segal-Bronstein: “It was a lot easier in those days to raise not only money and supplies but also awareness and interest.”

Segal-Bronstein made a series of trips to Saigon during the 1970s. Staying for three to four weeks at a time, she worked at an orphanage and did paperwork for children being adopted. Soon, she applied to adopt children herself, and after 18 months of red tape, she was able to adopt two Vietnamese orphans, Tam-Lien and Tran, who were both two.

In 1972, Segal-Bronstein visited Cambodia and discovered that the “secret war” there had created the need for a similar project. Each day she was there, she and a colleague roamed Phnom Penh, rescuing orphans from the streets.

On one occasion, a bomb exploded less than three metres from the car Segal-Bronstein was driving, leaving a crater in the road. “I’d had the silly notion that if you were there to do something good, then people would know you weren’t involved in the politics and no one would bother you,” she recalls.

Segal-Bronstein managed to escape to Vietnam with the orphans before Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge seized power in 1975. Within two weeks of her escape, she had helped arrange for orphaned Vietnamese children to be airlifted from Saigon to the United States. Originally scheduled to fly out with them, she opted to go on a flight a Canadian government official had arranged for her and the Cambodian children – it meant there’d be more room for Vietnamese orphans on the evacuation flight. Sadly, the plane carrying these orphans crashed, and many of the children and their adult escorts were killed.

In 1976, Segal-Bronstein moved, with her husband and 12 children (seven of whom are adopted from countries around the world), to Guatemala, where that year she established Casa Canada, a medical clinic and orphanage, and, in 1979, Healing the Children, a program created to bring seriously ill children from Guatemala to hospitals in North America for medical treatment.

The family returned to Canada in 1981; Healing the Children not only continued in Guatemala but expanded to countries around the world.

The peripatetic Canadian returned to Cambodia in 1989, re-establishing an orphanage called Canada House, which had closed when the Khmer Rouge had taken over Phnom Penh 14 years before. In 1992, Segal-Bronstein was mugged on the streets of Phnom Penh and sustained severe injuries. She returned to this country to recuperate, but Canada House continued to function until 1997, by which time all of its children had been placed with families in Cambodia and abroad.

That year, Segal-Bronstein launched the charity Canadacares Children’s International Foundation, whose purpose is to help children in need, such as victims of land mines or hurricanes.

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Last October, she worked with public schools near her home in Val Morin to provide cloth bags filled with school supplies to children in a Guatemalan settlement for people who had been displaced by Hurricane Mitch two years before. The children who received the kits were fascinated by the accompanying letters and pictures from the Canadian children. This sparked the idea for Around the World Kid 2 Kid, a project that would see young people from both developed and developing countries writing to children who are living through natural disasters and wars. And in November, a small paediatric hospital Segal-Bronstein helped establish opened in a former rooming house in Guatemala City.

Currently, she is working on a project to acquire old North American school buses and convert them into mobile medical clinics that would provide immunization and other basic health-care services in rural Guatemala.

For Naomi Segal-Bronstein, children in need are the cause of a lifetime. – *Sheldon Gordon*