

# LA JOLLA LIGHT

## LIFESTYLE

For La Jollan Gary Rectenwald, charity  
REALLY begins at home



Gary Rectenwald poses on a swing in the backyard of the La Jolla home where he has done an incredible amount of good.

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***People in Your La Jolla Neighborhood:***

As in many homes, the photos on Gary Rectenwald's mantel display children engaged in proud-parent moments: high-school sports, graduations, proms.

But the children in Rectenwald's photos aren't his — at least they weren't *initially*.

Rectenwald, 68, adopted six kids in 1999 to save them from the ravages of war-torn Kosovo. He moved them into his 2,800-square-foot Mt. Soledad home. He also paid for three of them to attend college, after all graduated from La Jolla High School. (One graduated with honors from the University of San Diego, two others went to St. Mary's of Moraga.)

That's not all. Rectenwald also housed their parents, who slept in one bedroom while the kids slept — in two bunk beds and a queen — in another. To pay for all this added financially unplanned expense, Rectenwald — a Toledo, Ohio native who worked for IBM until 1995, when Big Blue tried to relocate him out of La Jolla — came out of retirement to start a business-to-business travel company.

Rectenwald's sacrifices don't even end there. In 2010 — when the original extra eight grew to an extra 14 plus a dog — Rectenwald bought them their own house. The Ramnabajas now live in National City — except for the youngest daughter, Valbona. She stayed with Rectenwald for the 20-year duration and — along with her husband and their two daughters — moved out only three weeks ago.

So what kind of person does all this?

If you ask Rectenwald, the answer begins with Catholic. A self-described deeply devout servant of Jesus, Rectenwald has been active for 30 years at All Hallows Parish. He's also the executive director of the Catholic Community Foundation of San

Diego, where he has raised more than \$50 million help parishes, Catholic schools and social-services organizations in his first two years.

But, even as selfless Catholics go, Rectenwald is an exceptional case. Rather than trying to convert his new family members to the religion he believes so passionately in, he allowed them to continue practicing their native Islam in his own house.

Feeling uncharitable in comparison? You're not alone.



Rectenwald (top, second from left) poses with the Ramnabaja family, whom he took in shortly after they arrived in La Jolla.

COURTESY

**What was your own childhood like?**

I grew up with one brother and one sister. From a very young age, my mom and dad were very service-oriented, never said no to anybody who needed help. And they instilled that in us. To this day, if there's something I think I'm capable of doing and somebody needs it, I'll find the time to do it.

### **Have you ever married or had a family?**

No, I've always been single, always out volunteering my time to others. So this was my first opportunity to have my own family. At the time, my mom, dad, sister and brother were all living in Florida. And I've been out here since 1989 by myself. I wasn't necessarily looking for a family.

### **So how did this one come to you?**

I was volunteering for Father Joe's Villages and Catholic Charities. It was early 1999, following the Kosovo War, and there were a number of refugees assigned the right to seek refuge in the United States. They had lost everything in the war. The Serbian police used to come into the schools and randomly shoot children, just to put their stake in the ground and let people know they were in charge.

Most of these families were two-to-four people. But there was this one family of eight that Catholic Charities was having a lot of trouble placing. The eldest girl, Jehona, was born four months after the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986 and had a hole in her heart. Kosovo was 400 miles downwind, so a lot of children born around that time had health problems. That was picked up by the NATO doctors at the refugee camp in Macedonia. And because there was a rheumatic bacteria going through Eastern Europe, they were afraid that if she caught it, it would kill her. So they targeted San Diego because Rady's Children's Hospital specialized in the kind of heart damage she had.

### **So you volunteered your home when you first heard about them?**

Not at first. Through Catholic Charities, I helped get them through all the health screening and we got them social-security numbers. But then, they were going to split them up and put them in foster homes. And I just couldn't let that happen. Catholics believe in stewardship and, in so doing, we are called to gratefully give back to God in proportion to God's gifts and blessings to us. I believe God called me to do His work with the Ramnabaja family.

**To go from living by yourself in a house to sharing it with eight other people — that's an unusual degree of sacrifice!**

Actually, I couldn't do enough for these kids, just because of what they had experienced and witnessed — things that I will never experience and witness. I was just lucky to be born in a very safe place at a very safe time. I've often thought, 'What if I was born in Kosovo in the early '90s, when all this ethnic cleansing was taking place?' And I just wanted to make them safe and secure here and give them the chance to live the American dream.

**One of the most incredible things about this story is that you allowed a Muslim family to continue its own religious practices in your home. Did your mission to do the best thing for other people ever chafe against your Catholic mission to save their souls?**

You know? Not really. I bought them korans in Albanian and English. I bought them prayer rugs and they used them to pray five times a day. They worship God just like I worship God. Muslims do not believe that Jesus was the son of God, but they regard him as a prophet. We would talk a lot about Jesus. Once a year, I would put on the movie, 'Jesus of Nazareth' and the girls would ask why they're killing that wonderful man who did all these miracles. And I would explain what our belief was, but I always wanted them to make their own decision.

**How has this experience changed you as a person?**

I now have an extended family, and they really *are* my family. We really care deeply about each other.

**Are you surprised that this had such a happy ending, or did you know it would?**

I have to tell you this ... Jehona just passed away about four weeks ago, during childbirth. So it's a very sad time for our family. Because of her heart condition, they didn't think she would be able to get pregnant. And when she did, she thought it was a miracle and a gift from God, and she wanted to see it out.

But her son did survive. His name is Dijan. He's a beautiful little baby who looks just like her, and we're so grateful for that, because she literally gave her life for his.