

Born to serve: The former high- flying wine guru who swapped a life of luxury to help those in need

By Adam Purcell



From New York to Delhi to Bangkok to Hong Kong, Fred Tibbitts' annual dinners bring together the world's leading hoteliers for a night of wining and dining and inspiring conversation. The message: "Let go of what you have and help those less fortunate." American expat Fred did. And he couldn't be happier

■ SOMETIME in the winter of 1956, when Fred Tibbitts was 10 years old, he had a frosty exchange with his dad that he'll never forget.

"I had finished school for the day and I'd walked to a nearby street corner where I thought my father would pick me up," he says. "It was freezing cold and sleeting, and just a typically horrible winter's day.

"The problem is, I'd made a mistake and I was actually meant to meet my father outside a nearby shop. It was thirty minutes before he found me. And he was furious."

Fred's dad shouted at him for not following his instructions properly, and Fred began to cry. "You know what your problem is, son," Fred's dad barked. "You wear your heart on your sleeve. You want to tell the world all about yourself and all your problems, and the world doesn't care and the world doesn't want to hear it."

Fred was stunned into silence. "I was so shocked," he said. "I know it hurt him to be so cruel to me, but I honestly think he was trying to teach me what he thought was an important lesson – that people wouldn't understand someone who is so open about their feelings. But that is who I was then, and that is who I am now. So I never learned that lesson. And I'm glad of it."

Fred, who turns 70 this year, is nothing but an open book. And what a story he has to tell.

From studying and practicing clinical psychology in the early '60s, to obtaining a degree in economics, to becoming a highly respected international wine supplier, to converting to Buddhism and living in a monastery for 18 months, to giving away most of his possessions and eventually turning his own company into a social enterprise which gives all of its money to charity – well, there aren't many people as humble and caring as Fred.

To anyone who works in the hotel industry, Fred will be a familiar face. Every year he hosts ten special annual dinners (eight in Southeast Asia, two in his native New York), all of which bring together leading figures in hospitality for a night of wining and dining, all in the name of charity.

There's never a head table – "nobody is more important than anyone else," says Fred – and there's no seating plan. The events simply bring together influential people who can help make a difference to the lives of those who are less fortunate. Awards are presented to those deemed to have had the most positive impact during the year, and at each event Fred always takes to the stage to share his signature message: "Service is the highest calling. Excellence is a way of life."

It's inspiring stuff. Especially when you learn of the journey Fred has undergone to get to the stage where he

can now confidently stand in front of some of the world's most respected hoteliers, and tell them that, to improve their services and lead better lives, they should all simply "let go" of what they have.

This, in a nutshell, is exactly what Fred once did.

Time was Fred had it all – a nice New York apartment, a state of the art sound and TV system, a vast library of movies (VCRs – this was the mid '80s) and a mountain of music CDs. And as for work, well, putting his degree in economics to good use, Fred joined The Seagram Corporation, once the largest distiller of alcoholic beverages in the world (it's now closed), at its American headquarters in New York City. Here he spent 11 years rapidly rising up the ranks, learning from some of the finest marketing minds in F&B, perfecting his knowledge of wines and spirits, befriending top level executives, and flying everywhere in a private jet.

But something felt like it was missing. Something just wasn't quite right.

Fred knew exactly what that something was when he discovered Buddhism.

"Around 1990 I was looking for something to read on my way back from San Francisco to New York and I picked up a book about Buddhism," he says. "And, oh my, it just made so much sense.

"And so I kept reading more about it. And the more I read, the more fascinated I became. Five years later, in 1995, I knew that I had to convert to Buddhism."

So Fred ventured to the renowned Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery in Woodstock, New York, which he began visiting most weekends for teachings. By this point he had been married and divorced twice, had two grown up kids (a son and a daughter), and was flying high enough at work to change his schedule to include more time at the monastery.

In January 1996, he literally moved in.

"I'd spend long weekends at the Monastery and work midweek in Manhattan," he says. "I slept in an army cot, shared a room, excelled in the teachings, and at long last learned how to be in a low state of continuous, autonomous meditation 24 hours a day. In fact, staying at the monastery with limited material possessions had such a positive effect on my life – I decided to give almost everything I had away."

Deciding to part with his belongings, and then follow through on this decision, proved to be more difficult than Fred first thought it would be.



Fred Tibbitts & Associates in focus

FRED Tibbitts & Associates ("FTA") is a social entrepreneurship, operating as an NGO via outsourcing all functions, the founder not drawing a salary and keeping all expenses to a minimum; and donating all monthly and annual profits to those less fortunate in Asia Pacific and the United States.

FTA is committed to easing the suffering of those less fortunate via contributions at all ten annual FTA Asia Pacific dinners as well as NYC Spring & Fall. FTA does direct intervention charity and family social work for individual, very poor families in Cambodia and Thailand.

Fred Tibbitts' background in Clinical Psychology and Social Work allows very important assistance beyond the carefully-planned direct charity (weekly and monthly, as needed from the FTA dinner revenues), with Tibbitts working to stabilize families, insure their healthcare, insure schooling of the children, and acting as the resident Shaman-clinician for each family in distress.

"When you decide to give everything away, you realize what you are most attached to," he says. "And there were two big hurdles for me: My VCR collection, mainly music videos which I loved, as well as my huge collection of CDs. I was in a rock band in high school, so music has always been a big part of my life. But, after some meditation, I decided to give the lot away to my son and daughter, and, you know what – when they took everything away, I felt so much better."

Fred believes that the biggest barrier preventing people from fully connecting with each other is our attachment to material things.

“Sure, my kids thought I was being a little eccentric giving everything away, but they still supported me as they knew it was what I wanted to do; this was the path I wanted to take. And, I must say that ‘letting go’ was a real breath of fresh air. I felt as light as a feather. Clear minded. Cleansed. And what was left? A keen desire to focus on people.”

Of course, Fred couldn’t stay in the monastery forever, and although he’d succeeded in ‘letting go,’ he still needed to make a living.

“Buddhists believe that the purpose of money is to take what you need, to cover your basic needs, and buy some affordable luxuries, and then you should let the rest pass through your fingers to benefit those less fortunate,” says Fred. “But in order to serve others as best as possible, I knew I’d have to find a way to make money which I’d then be able to pass on.”

So Fred got back to work with a new sense of purpose. And when he first visited Bangkok on a business trip in August of 1998, he knew what the end goal would be: transition his trade from New York to Bangkok, and help those who are less fortunate in Southeast Asia.

“Thailand, back then, was very much like the US in the 1950s. Decisions by big brands on national accounts were only just starting and most of the wine and spirits producers were just throwing money at the distributors and saying, ‘here, you do it.’ But, thanks to my rich experience with Seagram, I knew I could do a great job for them.

“So I started calling all the chains – Hyatt, Marriott, Sofitel, Starwood, everybody – and before you know it, I had established Fred Tibbitts & Associates and I was the top national accounts wine and spirits person in Asia.

“I worked with all the top names, Sofitel, Sheraton, Westin – you name it – helping to expand their portfolios, establish best practices, and even train



Hoteliers were out in force for Fred's 2015 Bangkok dinner

staff. At the same time, I was channeling as much money as possible into various charitable causes.”

Fred continued to do this up until three years ago, when, in another act of ‘letting go,’ he officially retired and restructured his businesses to become what he calls “a social entrepreneurship acting as an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization).”

“The reason I can’t say it’s an NGO is because I never applied to the US Internal Revenue Service for official status. Why? Well, I found out that it would cost thousands of dollars in accounting fees and legal fees to do so, and that we’d have to re-certify every year, just for them to say that I’m doing what I’m doing, which is giving money away.

“So I said, screw that. I’ll just give the money away and tell the truth – we’re a social entrepreneurship run as an NGO. So that’s what I do, and it works beautifully.”

Alongside the aforementioned annual dinners, which raise funds for various scholarship programmes and impoverished families, Fred, once again embracing the role as a clinical psychologist, also personally helps needy families in Thailand and Cambodia. This even extends to adopting children he’s rescued from a life on the streets. Over the past 20 years he’s married two single Thai mothers and one single Cambodian mother (at separate times, of course) so that he could take care of them and their children, educate them, and give them an opportunity to start businesses either here or in the States.

“The women and children I have rescued were very poor and had nothing,” says Fred, “and I was adamant

to give them the chance in the life that they deserve. After helping them, and when they were established and fully ok, I simply let them go. I’m now on the third family I’ve saved, but this will be the last as they have asked me to continue taking care of them here.”

Funds for Fred’s clinical social work comes from a large network of angel investors located all over the world. The money they donate is used to help pay for

hospital bills, food, clothing, education and other essential items. A recent case involved raising enough money so that a young Cambodian girl could have a prosthetic foot fitted. The results have completely changed her life.

As for Fred, well, he doesn’t earn a bean. He simply keeps what he needs to get by and continue to help his adopted family.

“People who have closed hearts think I’ve lost my marbles,” says Fred. “But like oil and water, my heart is open, theirs isn’t. It doesn’t mean I’m any better than them. I’m not. It is what it is.

“I’m just happy that I’m finally doing what I intended to do, and what I’ve always done best – following my deep-rooted sincere desire to serve those less fortunate.

“I don’t do it to make me feel good, I do it because it is the right thing to do.”

But with 70 fast approaching, will he have the energy to continue down this path for many years to come?

“This isn’t my energy, it’s the energy of the universe,” he says. “Read any recent theory and you’ll soon come to learn that we’re all connected – from a spiritual standpoint, and from a scientific standpoint. And when you serve others, as I do – most sincerely with all my heart – the energy in the universe will always make sure that you have enough energy to accomplish what you are intending to accomplish. A byproduct of this, of course, is that it will make you happy. Hopefully many other open hearted people will choose to follow the same path.”

So, yeah. Fred does wear his heart on his sleeve, and he does want the world to know his feelings. And the world is a little better for it.