

The Urban Shepherd is a biographical self-help book that shows how a young poor shepherd boy followed his desire to find the American Dream.

The Urban Shepherd: Chasing the American Dream

By Ben Amor

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The Urban Shepherd

Tunisia  North Africa

Chasing the American Dream...
...the Story of a Shepherd boy



Ben Amor

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Chapter Six

The Dream Continues

1983–1985

Ages Thirty-Seven Through Thirty-Nine

“Make small commitments and keep them. Be a light, not a judge. Be a model, not a critic. Be part of the solution, not part of the problem.”

—Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

After I legally divorced, it was time for me to take some time off and meditate, so I decided to travel to Acapulco, Mexico. It was there that I met an intriguing woman from Mexico City named Lucy. After exchanging numbers, I contacted her several times before I realized it was difficult to have a full conversation with her, as we spoke different languages. It was apparent that I needed to find a way to communicate with her, so I started taking Spanish at Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM)–San Antonio. I was still working at Datapoint, and I got involved in Amway, which is a direct sales business that operates on the basis of multilevel marketing. I started to regroup and set goals in order to control my own destiny. I also honored my commitment to support my daughter, Lisa, and scheduled time to be with her.

I started to regroup and set goals in order to control my own destiny.

Lucy continually gave me confidence in life, and I was appreciative to be able to have someone to talk to, but I knew that I was not ready for another commitment, and certainly not ready for a serious relationship or another marriage. Later in our relationship, Lucy grew frustrated that I wasn't ready for commitment, yet she invited me to travel to many cities throughout Mexico with her. I enjoyed traveling with her; we ate great food, and I gained a lot of practice in the Spanish language. Lucy also traveled to San Antonio to visit me, and many times, we picnicked at the surrounding beaches in North Padre and Mustang Island, Texas. Lisa Mona and her grandfather, Mr. James, would travel with Lucy

and me. My good friend Lee Phillips, fluent in Spanish, helped quite a bit in translating back and forth between Lucy and me during her visits to San Antonio, and Lucy was attempting to learn English by attending classes.

I wanted to take my time with our relationship; it was important to learn more about her and gain insight into her culture. While dating Lucy, I kept in mind that I needed to keep my priorities straight and make the best decisions for my future and myself. The most important priority in my life at the time was not to find love but to attain new achievements and higher goals.

“You must follow your talents and life objectives to make the right choice.”

—Elizabeth S. Steger, *Dreams of an Immigrant*

I spent a lot of time with Lee Phillips, as I wanted to learn from him. He knew more about computers than anyone else I knew at the time. He insisted that I attend a seminar called EST (Erhard Standard Training). I wasn't exactly sure at the time what EST was; I read over the brochures Lee gave me, but I shortly misplaced them. He brought up the EST training time and time again. After he quit his job at Datapoint, I visited him to see what he was up to. He showed me his computer system and explained that he was working for himself now. Lee's language and listening abilities had changed dramatically since the EST training; he didn't seem like the same person he was before. When we had worked together at Datapoint, he had been very impatient, socially awkward, and self-centered, and his attire had been inappropriate for a working environment. He seemed to feel superior to others because of his extensive knowledge of computers and talent in his work. He was a nice guy but many times had failed to show that side of his personality.

At the time, and even today, the EST seminars were shrouded in myths and misconceptions. Werner Erhard created the program in 1971 as a way for people to reevaluate and take control of their lives. The sixty-hour seminars were mentally and physically strenuous; people were not allowed to leave the room to use the restroom and underwent psychological ordeals that often worried critics. The purpose of the intense seminars was for people to first reach an understanding of themselves and, after reaching self-actualization, use the tools

they were given to change into the people they wanted to be. The EST seminars taught participants that they were in control of their own lives and that they had the power to change anything in their lives if they wanted to.

One day, Lee invited me to an EST seminar in Austin, and this time I agreed to go, but when he arrived at my apartment to pick me up, he found a message saying that I was in school. He met me the next day, surprisingly not irritated. I gave him a bunch of excuses for my absence because the seminar didn't sound appealing to me and I couldn't bring myself to go. I was hesitant about the language that EST was using, which I didn't understand, and I thought the seminar sounded a little like brainwashing.

After a few weeks, Lee convinced me to at least attend the pre-seminar introduction session. At the session everyone was smiling and seemed very excited. One lady even gave me a hug. People greeted me and thanked me for coming; they acted as if they already knew me.

I had never had an experience like that. The atmosphere was cheerful, and everyone looked well put-together. Lee and I sat in the front row. I reluctantly stood up as he introduced me. When Craig, the leader, started talking about the purpose of the EST training, I had no idea what he was talking about. I'm not sure what changed in me during that seminar, but all I wanted to do was leave.

I planned to tell Lee that I wanted to leave as we walked toward the guest room where we had to make a commitment and register for the EST seminar, but when we got there, I sat with two graduates of the program and a guest speaker who talked about what the training had done for them. They admitted that the training was hard to explain to someone who had not studied it. The speaker said, "It's not psychology, religion, therapy, hypnotism, or anything related to that." They tried to persuade me to register, but I didn't want to get myself into something that I didn't know anything about. None of them could give me a clear perspective of anything the program stood for. That day back at my apartment, Lee told me that usually, about 200 to 250 people sat in rows, wearing comfortable clothing, as if they were in a movie theater. He said, "You use a pillow to rest your head or your feet or to sit on during the four-hour program. A trainer spends part of his time presenting data, and then there are

periods called processes in which you just close your eyes and look at particular aspects of yourself and your life so that you can have insights or realizations. After the process, people share their experience so that everyone can benefit.”

“Look, you’re my friend,” I told him. “If things don’t turn out the way you said, you’re responsible.” He didn’t hesitate to take that responsibility so I went ahead and registered and attend the EST seminar.

My training unlocked my strengths and capabilities: (1) to contribute to humanity and (2) to change my life and be more positive and focused. I went back to San Antonio with a new mindset, ready to work hard and enjoy life.

The seminar was held in Houston, Texas, and we attended. At the seminar a trainer approached the stage, and the EST training began. The ground rules were read and explained: We were allowed one meal break during the course of the day (the session began at nine in the morning and could last until sometime between midnight and four o’clock the next morning); no one was allowed to go to the restroom except during the short breaks announced by the trainer; talking and note-taking were prohibited; and no one was allowed to wear a watch. This program was vastly different from anything I had experienced previously, and I was eager to see the finished product of EST training. I was willing to engage in the program because I was rebuilding my life after my divorce.

EST is a self-awareness course that gives people the insights needed to deal with their problems in life.

During the session, everyone sat and reflected on their lives and how they wanted to change. Occasionally, people would share their experiences and revelations as the speaker led us through exercises and experiences that would help redirect our lives. *Transformation* was the first EST term that I picked up. I was told that I did not have to understand the term but only acknowledge it. Since participating in this session, I have recognized that one of the keys to being successful is solving your problems. Part of EST philosophy states that there is “no room for victims or excuses.” As the training continued, I felt I was gaining the strength to take responsibility for my life. We were supposed to “create our own experiences,” and I found myself starting to do just that.

In the same way, Dan Miller explains in his book *No More Mondays*, “Yes, the grass frequently appears greener on the other side of the fence. But in reality the grass is greenest where it gets watered most.” I am responsible for my own actions and their consequences. If I don’t like something, I have to change it. So for most of my life I have decided to take responsibility for what happens in my life without blaming others.

Day two of the training was focused on the Truth Process. We were instructed to lie down on the floor and shut our eyes while choosing a significant item or problem in our lives that we wanted to solve, confront, or let go. On the third day of the Danger Process, the lights were turned off and speakers blared with the voices of people shouting that we would not get out of here alive. The hysterics created by this activity were meant to scare the fear out of us; afterward, I felt like I had lost five pounds of emotional stress.

My time spent in EST training was truly one of the most powerful experiences of my life. It gave me a sense of focus and depleted my fear of commitment. My divorce had led me down a bumpy road, but I returned from the seminar a transformed person. My training unlocked my strengths and capabilities: (1) to contribute to humanity and (2) to change my life and be more positive and focused. I went back to San Antonio with a new mindset, ready to work hard and enjoy life. I even went to the follow-up courses on the topics of communication, money, self-expression, and leadership, and eventually, I became a seminar assistant.

*“There’s a time to stop thinking about it; you’ll never see all the angles. There’s a time to stop preparing; too much knowledge can bog you down. Yes, there is even a time to stop hoping for it; at some point you have to get off your butt and launch! You have to act!
You have to step out!”*

—Bob Beaudine, *The Power of Who*

I later sent a letter to Werner Erhard, the founder of EST, thanking him for his methods, which had opened my eyes and allowed me to open up to others.

He responded and supported my efforts to try to develop the EST program in North Africa, starting with Tunisia. After all of this, I still continued to seek

more information until I found out that Werner got in trouble with the IRS and sold the business. EST has since garnered negative connotations of brainwashing and cult-like behavior. I only took basic ideas from the training and did not invest myself wholly.

“Procrastination, the opposite of decision, is a common enemy, which practically every individual must conquer.”

—Napoleon Hill, *Think and Grow Rich!*

I have always enjoyed reading and learning from others, and much of my knowledge on how to dream and achieve comes from years of reading books and actively living out the advice in them. *The Magic of Goals*, by Ronald L. Reynolds, is a powerful book that inspired me. Reynolds states that, ambition-wise, most people die by age thirty. He states, “We fail to attain a level of success we are proud of because we do not know what we want to strive for and become preoccupied with other things, such as marriage, mortgages and children.” He advises readers to make a list of the things we want but don’t have, as well as a list of the things we have but don’t want, and to set clear goals to eliminate negatives and obtain positives. Then we must accept that our goals will come true and must use our excitement to propel us to achieve them. Rather than coasting through life in our comfort zones, we must set higher objectives for things we “must” have, and then acquire them. A life that is purposeful is achieved through deliberate, planned progress that yields lasting rewards. Instead of being pulled through life, we must push ourselves through, “changing ourselves when necessary to avoid lying, procrastinating, oversleeping, worrying and being shy.”

Reynolds also states that serving ourselves first enables us to form better relationships with others. I took this advice to heart as I recovered from my divorce and set out to live a fulfilling life. In *The Magic of Goals*, Reynolds says that to succeed, people need to have goals: “Humans require objectives— something to go for, and when we have goals, we discover talents within ourselves that we did not know we had.”

“Most people die at age thirty, but are not buried until age sixty.”

—Ronald L. Reynolds, *The Magic of Goals*

The first step I made to improve my life after the EST session was moving to a new apartment that was quiet, was closer to my job, and had new furniture. The apartment was also located near a health club, where I registered for daily fitness workouts. I also signed up for a seven-day EST training course in San Francisco.

After the training course, I challenged myself to survive in San Francisco for two weeks without bringing any money with me. Within two days of arriving, I got jobs in construction and plumbing, and one of the guys I met while working let me stay at his house. Starting with no money and only determination, I proved to myself that I could make it in this country. I was on top of the world, and I was convinced that if I had done it, anyone could. Later that same year the EST was canceled because of reports of individuals dying from physical exertion in similar courses

After my San Francisco journey, I met Dink Robart and Paul Frizzell from the Therapeutic Body Workers of San Antonio. They got me involved in learning Shiatsu finger pressure, a natural way to help people relax and cope with stress, muscle pain, nausea, anxiety, and depression. Eventually, I got certified in kinesiology, reflexology, meditation, joint manipulation, and holistic health therapy. I considered returning to Tunisia to open a therapy clinic, but that idea faded because I wanted to make a difference in the world. I decided that I wanted to contribute to the world in a different way.

June 1983 brought a life-changing revelation. I was haunted by a recurring nightmare filled with images of starving children in Africa, frequently shown on the news. In my dreams, children surrounded me, crying out for help in different languages. The nightmare came to me three times in one night. The children wailed and sobbed. I couldn't get the sound out of my mind. Again and again, I asked what I could do. This was no ordinary dream. In his book *The Power of Who*, Bob Beaudine explains that there are two kinds of dreams: the ordinary kind that people have when they go to bed, and the kind in which the dream (vision) serves as "the fire that energizes you toward your destiny." What I experienced was *that* sort of dream.

In EST training, we had learned about the Hunger Project (THP) and the End Hunger Network (EHN) and how they were making a difference by “mobilizing village clusters at the grassroots level to build self-reliance, empowering women as key change agents, and forging effective partnerships with the local government.” THP is a global nonprofit organization founded in 1977 by several individuals who asserted that enough resources exist to feed the world and that it is the lack of willpower to effectively distribute these resources that causes starvation. The founders included Werner Erhard (the founder of EST), John Denver, Bob Fuller, Joan Holmes, Dana Meadows, and Roy Prosterman. THP attempts to carry out its mission of ending hunger in Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. My nightmares drove me to make my personal declaration of commitment to THP in the summer of 1983. By 1984, 2.8 million people had joined the crusade against hunger.

Werner Erhard stated, “The Hunger Project is not about solutions. It’s not about fixing up the problem. It’s not anybody’s good idea. The Hunger Project is about creating a context—creating the end of hunger as an idea whose time has come. As a function of the Hunger Project, we will learn what we need to know to make an idea’s time come; then we will know how to make the world work.”

THP is adamant that there is enough food available to feed the hungry and that what we really lack globally is the drive and will to make a personal commitment to ending world hunger. As THP was created by Warner, one of the founders of EST, THP is similarly focused on ending excuses and placing the responsibility of ending world hunger on each and every individual. Unlike traditional organizations that are focused on distributing food to the hungry, THP is centered on educating and empowering individuals to become involved in the project. Similar in mind to organizers of THP, motivational speaker Kola Olutimehin also supports the notion that there is plenty out there for everyone in the world. According to Olutimehin, “The world is filled with an abundance of resources, and we can all have plenty, without a loss for other people...our call and mission is to be prepared for and actually carry out the hard work that is usually the prerequisite for a dream’s accomplishment.” For me, this dream

entailed seeing that the abundance of resources would benefit more people throughout the world.

In her book *Dead Aid*, Dambisa Moyo argues that all the help that Western countries have poured into Africa over the past few decades has made the problem worse rather than better: “Aid has been, and continues to be, an unmitigated political, economic, and humanitarian disaster for most parts of the developing world.” I knew that I did not want to follow in the steps of the disastrous aid programs in the past. Instead, I wanted to help African people empower themselves.

While researching data about hunger in Africa, I focused my search on the infant mortality rate (IMR), which measures the number of infants per 1,000 who die before the age of one year. I wanted to learn about the causes of infant mortality, hoping to learn of preventative measures. A country’s IMR also indicates the level of hunger it experiences. At that time, an IMR of fifty or under meant that hunger was no longer a basic issue in society. Currently, I see that the number of countries with a high hunger index has decreased exponentially by lowering their IMRs. The most prevalent types of hunger are (1) chronic undernutrition, meaning an individual consistently fails to get enough nutrients; (2) malnutrition, meaning an individual is not getting specific vitamins or minerals needed; (3) malabsorptive hunger, in which the presence of intestinal parasites prohibits an individual from absorbing the nutrition available in the food consumed; (4) seasonal hunger, indicative of a dearth of food during certain times of the year; and (5) famine, the result of a disaster, either natural or man-made.

I corresponded with people from all over the United States and Africa to share ideas about how to end hunger in Africa and the United States. I contacted many people, including James P. Grant, executive director of UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund); musical artists John Denver and Kenny Rogers, who created a million-dollar fund for journalists who publicize hunger issues; United Way; and the World Bank.

Through the resources of THP, I learned that in the early 1980s, twenty-one children died of hunger every minute, 41,000 people died of hunger each day, and 15 million people died of hunger each year. I was astonished by these figures

because even at that time, enough food to feed nearly twice the population of our planet was being produced. The “three Zs” of Africa—Zaire, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—alone have enough land to feed the entire African continent if developed properly. In “A Shift in the Wind,” a periodical published by THP, a hunger expert claimed, “For the first time in history, the world community possesses the technology and resources to end hunger forever.” Solutions existed, though initiatives were not taken.

The good news is that by 1983, hunger had already ended in fifty-three countries (thirty-five of them since World War II). Although hunger still exists, it is diminishing. Many improvements were made between 1983 and 2011, the year I started writing this book. Tunisia’s IMR of 75 in 1983 became 22.5; Burkina Faso’s IMR of 210 in 1983 was reduced to 84.5 by 2011; Sierra Leone’s IMR of 220 dropped to 154 by 2011.

According to the UNICEF article “New Hope in Dark Times,” the GOB initiatives of growth charting, oral rehydration therapy (adding certain salts to water), and breastfeeding could save one million infants’ lives each year if implemented correctly. The GOB techniques can be accompanied by first aid knowledge, literacy, immunization for children, and sanitation (FLIS) as a means to end hunger and starvation. Also, spacing out the birth of children can alleviate the IMR. The problem is that the less confident people are that their children will survive, the more children they aim to have in order to successfully create a new generation. As T. Harv Eker highlights in his book, more than actual income disparity, one of the major differences between poor people and rich people is attitude. According to Eker, “Rich and successful people are bigger than their problems, while poor and unsuccessful people are smaller than their problems.” Unlike traditional nonprofits, THP wanted to get to the source of poverty and hunger. As Robert Egger, the creator of his own nonprofit aiming to end hunger in his neighborhood, explains, the problem with most nonprofits is that “since the 1960s thousands of organizations in communities across the country have developed their strategies for winning their battles.... They have duplicated each other’s services and fought one another for supplies and funding.” THP was not competing against other nonprofits but was getting to the heart of the matter.

I learned that population growth and literacy have a direct effect on a country's IMR. A general correlation shows that countries with higher literacy rates and lower population-growth rates tend to have lower IMRS. In the 1980s, the United States had a 99 percent literacy rate and a population growth of 0.7 percent; the IMR was 11. In China, the literacy rate was 69 percent and the population growth was 1.5 percent; the IMR was 44. Sierra Leone, an African country, had a 15 percent literacy rate and population growth of 2.6 percent; the IMR was 206.

Mothers who are literate have more opportunities to learn new ideas and to develop the confidence to implement those ideas. THP credits the decrease in hunger in recent decades to the increase in female education, but to slow the population growth rate, conditions had to improve so that people would be more confident in their children's survival.

"A journey of a thousand miles starts with the first step."

—Chinese proverb

My mind was completely occupied with ways for me to implement GOBFLIS (growth charting, oral rehydration therapy, breastfeeding, first aid, literacy, immunizations, and sanitation) in Tunisia and end hunger. I even communicated with Kathleen Cook, a correspondent of THP, pledging to reduce the IMR of Tunisia by 50 percent by the year 1990, for which I was commended. The nightmare I had had about starving children catalyzed my dream to end world hunger.

I was photocopying pictures of starving children in Ethiopia at a Kinko's near my apartment. A woman noticed the horrifying pictures and asked me questions about hunger and infant mortality. After our conversation, we exchanged phone numbers. That was how I fatefully met Donna DeSoto in 1984.

"If you worry about what other people think, you'll have more confidence in their opinion than you do in your own. Your future does not depend on the opinions or the permission of others."

—Andy Andrews, *Mastering the Seven Decisions*

During a near-death experience, Donna had vowed to start a mission for children. She created a nonprofit organization, Sav-Baby of Texas, in response to what the media had called the “throw-away baby epidemic” of the 1980s and 1990s. In 1994, her organization became Sav-Baby, Inc., a subordinate of my own organization, Terra-Genesis.

In 1984, after working at Datapoint for seven years, I quit my job as a computer technician to satisfy the haunting beckoning of the starving children in my nightmare. Was I crazy, or was the dream a calling? At the time, most people I approached about my mission said I was crazy. I was told by friends and others to take my idea to San Francisco, so I did, but I realized that San Antonio was where I was meant to plant my seeds of change. I organized and reorganized my research about hunger, looking for some way to contribute. I envisioned child survival centers (CSCs) around the world, tied together by a high-tech communication network. The network, linked to medical school and university databases, would gather and provide the latest research on social projects, economics, housing, and other information to be used by developing countries.

The CSCs would provide not only basic health care but also education about nutrition, first aid, and literacy. Even though it sounded crazy at the time, I was really doing what I had to do. As Don Miguel Ruiz says, “You can have many great ideas in your head, but what makes the difference is the action. Without action upon an idea, there will be no manifestation, no results, and no reward.” I actually became homeless on purpose to research why and how homelessness occurs and how people can escape poverty.

Creating Terra-Genesis was my first step in attacking hunger and establishing CSCs. I became the founder and creator of the SANTUN Project (because my dream was born in San Antonio and I was born in Tunisia), which is now Terra-Genesis, Inc. Jim and Barbara Collins, two of the founding board members and a devoted couple that I had met at a party with other EST graduates, coined the name Terra-Genesis. “Terra” was fitting because my vision involved the land and earth, and the word “genesis” bespoke a new beginning. Terra-Genesis literally means “the coming into being of the earth.” Over the years, we have experimented with different logos depicting various images, such

as children or trees, but a constant element in the design is a handshake, which is associated with linking people together, helping out, mutual goals, and cooperation.

“To receive love it must be given with no thought of its return.

To love for fulfillment, satisfaction, or pride is not love. Love is a gift on which no return is demanded.”

—Og Mandino, *The Greatest Miracle in the World*

Terra-Genesis was created as a grassroots organization committed to promoting CSCs and reducing hunger, and while Terra-Genesis has remained faithful to that ideal, it has also expanded to include so much more. The idea was to create centers in Tunisia where information and resources could be provided in a way to fight and end hunger and reduce infant mortality in the world. These centers would then be linked together to share information and resources on a global scale.

It was scary to quit my regular paying job that I had been so successful at and to completely redirect myself toward pursuing a new goal in my life, but I knew I had a dream worth fighting for. In addition, cutting myself off from my old job was an exhilarating chance to see if I could make it on my own, as my own boss. In *The Secrets of the Millionaire Mind*, Eker challenges all workers to tie their salaries to their performance, either by accepting a job paid on percentage or by working for themselves. I was taking this millionaire’s challenge and trying to make it as my own boss.

To acquaint myself with nonprofit organizations, I took a class taught by Joan Flanagan and read her books *The Successful Volunteer Organization* and *The Grassroots Fundraising Book*.

I needed to determine whether I had any business starting a nonprofit. Ms. Flanagan’s books helped me realize that Terra-Genesis was unique enough to benefit people’s lives with unduplicated services, and that it was a manageable organization with clear and urgent goals; its existence was imperative. I also learned tips about running an organization, how to elect a good board, what kind of fundraising events to hold, and the biggest downfalls of organizations, namely

a lack of the will to succeed and unclear goals. Her best advice to me was to record my communications. She suggested that it wasn't my poor English limiting my ability to convince people of my dream, but my ineffective communication style. I evaluated and improved my communication, and I also took a proposal-writing workshop to make myself as valuable to the organization as I could.

On July 4, 1984, Terra-Genesis held its first meeting of the board, consisting of Gary Griess, Kenneth Riley, and myself. During the meeting, we discussed drafting a budget to operate on and subscribed to the BRS database, an information-retrieval system. Dr. Gary Griess, a biochemist at the UT Health Science Center and the first to sign on as a board member of Terra-Genesis, submitted our Articles of Association, which outlines the purpose of the organization and names the initial trustees. He also submitted the IRS Form 1023 to give us a 501(c)(3) tax exemption.

We had Terra-Genesis incorporated by the state of Texas early on and began to build a sturdy board of trustees, which in a year's time gained the support of approximately 150 educators, health professionals, and business professionals in San Antonio, including my daughter, Lisa Mona. In addition to Gary Griess, Kenneth Riley, and Jim and Barbara Collins, Randy Glickman (another UT Health Science Center faculty member and scientist) and Lee Phillips were vital founding members. Margaret Mauldin, a local rancher, donated our computer system as part of a generous \$25,000 gift. At this particular point, I did not know about board members, board meetings, or fundraising and I couldn't speak English very well, so I relied on the board members heavily. The only assets I had were a dream, a message, and a burning desire. My prime objective was to reduce the IMR in Tunisia by half by the year 1990 and to create a comprehensive health, nutrition, and agricultural network to improve health and nutrition practices. As Elizabeth Steger says in her book, "The opportunity to start your own small enterprise makes [the United States] one of the best capitalist nations in the world." The opportunity to create Terra-Genesis is one that makes me thankful to have made America home.

“Ideas are intangible forces, but they have more power than the physical brains that give birth to them. They have the power to live on, after the brain that creates them has returned to dust.”

—Napoleon Hill, *Think and Grow Rich!*

My crusade was intended to empower individuals; it is a cause I have been dedicated to now for more than thirty years. A proverb that has resonated with me in my approach to helping people is “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” Rather than give handouts, I wanted to enable people to help themselves.

In the beginning, my dream was to create these centers in Tunisia and other African countries with the greatest need. I wanted to do for the services of CSCs what McDonald’s had done for the hamburger. I wanted to have a “franchise” of CSCs that were accessible around the globe, and just as high school students are trained to prepare hamburgers with raw materials, villagers would be able to administer vaccinations and other services when supplied with vaccines and medical equipment.

With the new era of technology, I believed that computers would serve as a vital link between these CSCs, as they would provide not only databases of information but also a way to communicate about new projects, problems, and solutions. I also envisioned a village community center to house each CSC. The network of computers in these foreign centers would be connected to the United States via satellite, transported by Teleport and Western Union dishes. The initial connection would be developed and processed through the University of Texas Health Science Center, which hosted databases such as BRS, DIALOG, SRC, and Medlars. Another benefit of a computerized database was that ordinary individuals in the remote communities could learn a wide range of information through linkage with inexpensive portable terminals, connected to a “warehouse” of information located in San Antonio, known as the International Communication Network (ICN). From the ICN, a National Communication Network could be linked in Tunisia, and from that, a Village Communication Network could extend to Bouficha, where various models of Radio Shack computers could be accessed. Subordinate connections could be made to other

countries around the world, but the primary link I was concerned with was from San Antonio to Bouficha.

Remember, then, the four laws of happiness and success:

1. *Count your blessings.*
2. *Proclaim your rarity.*
3. *Go another mile.*
4. *Use wisely your power of choice.*

—Og Mandino, *The Greatest Miracle in the World*

The information that these links could deliver would concern how to implement the GOBFLIS techniques and teaching aids for subjects such as reading, math, science, and physics. I dedicated a tremendous amount of effort to increasing the communication capabilities in developing countries, as my research concluded that enough grain exists to feed every person two loaves of bread each day and that lack of effective communication prohibited this from happening. The communication between the people who needed food and the government was nonexistent; everyone was doing their own thing without communicating with those who needed the food.

“Life brings change in the amount of money you bring in. Usually, the harder you work, the more money you can make. When you work for a company, the number of hours you’re willing to work may not seem important at any given moment, but those hours can make a huge difference when promotion time arrives. I always tell my daughter that people should like their work so they’ll be willing to improve their performance and be credited for their initiative, creativity, and leadership.”

—Elizabeth S. Steger, *Dreams of an Immigrant*

My strategy for feeding the world relied on a concept of linkage, which was explained in a 1984 *NW Recorder Times* article written about me entitled “Resident Fights Worldwide Hunger.” The article explained the mission of Terra-Genesis and our plan to end hunger: www.tgicorp.org/atoz archivesandmore. I explained in the article that information empowers people and that the essence of empowerment is making people aware that their desperate situations can be solved. The key, I emphasized, was linkage—the idea that resources were out

there and people needed ways to get to those resources on their own; instead of handouts, people needed tools to become self-sufficient.

The mission of Terra-Genesis is to improve the quality of life for everyone through information, education, and community involvement, thereby bridging the gap between those in need and those who want to help. As a grassroots organization, Terra-Genesis operates on a person-to-person basis, with very little political involvement and no political, religious, or ethnic affiliation, although I did write to Pope John Paul II and other religious figures for blessings and help with my endeavor. I aimed to gather data and information to develop and maintain a worldwide database of community resources that people could access to get the help they needed. I was trying to find a way to connect people.

As Bob Beaudine says in his book *The Power of Who*, “The ‘What’ in life will take you only so far. Sooner or later you’ll come to a chasm you can’t cross without someone’s help. That’s the ‘Who’ I’m talking about. People are ‘bridges’ you must cross to get where you want to go.” I believe in the same reasoning of looking to the people around you as resources to help you help yourself.

I had started talking to and sharing my dream with people on the east side of San Antonio, thinking that residents would ask me where I was originally from and would encourage my vision. I soon found out that a lot of people did not care at all about my dream; they often tried to put me down. One time, a homeowner listened to my story and asked me to wait while he brought over a dog chain—I was trying to tell people that I was trying to link people with resources, but most people did not understand the term “linkage.” This man brought the chain and showed me that I was talking about the chain links. I was relieved to find that he was using the chain to better understand the linkage and networks I was trying to explain, and also that he had gone to get a chain and not a gun. When I traveled to the west side of town to talk about my dream, I encountered a problem with the vast number of Spanish-speaking people. I was told many times that if I wanted to get through to people on that side of town, it was important to learn Spanish, which was another reason (in addition to trying to speak to Lucy) that I enrolled at UNAM–San Antonio. Even through my

struggles, I stayed optimistic. As Winston Churchill best put it, “The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”

I frequently went to the UT Health Science Center to research the underlying causes of infant mortality. Gary, the biochemist PhD who served on the board of directors, helped me greatly in navigating the use of the BRS and DIALOG databases, from which I learned not just how to reduce infant mortality but also the effects that educating mothers has on children’s health. The question “Can anything be done?” faded from my mind, to be replaced by “What will I do to help?” An anonymous Chinese poet once said, “If you are thinking a year ahead, sow a seed. If you are thinking ten years ahead, plant a tree.” I started thinking about results on a decade-to-decade basis and searched for long-term solutions and preventative health measures.

“The more we focus on rendering useful and beneficial service to other people, the more our lives can be expanded and enriched.”

—Kola Olutimehin, *Dream and Achieve*

Statistics about hunger in the United States published in a July 1984 article by THP showed that nearly one in every five children in poor Massachusetts communities was either stunted (below the expected height for his or her age), wasted (below the expected weight for his or her age), or anemic; these are all common indicators of undernutrition. A study conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health concluded that every dollar of WIC’s (Women, Infants, and Children) nutrition education and healthy food saved three dollars in medical costs of low-birthweight infants. Clearly, preventative health measures are an investment in public health.

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In 1984, the House of Representatives made strides to support oral rehydration therapy (ORT), including a bill that would provide \$144 million for ORT and basic health measures in Third World nations, citing the \$3,000 price tag of a child’s hospitalization for dehydration in the United States. Later that

summer, I testified before the Texas Senate Interim Committee on Hunger and Nutrition to promote my cause. I was encouraged by Rep. Mickey Leland of Houston, chairman of the US House of Representatives Select Committee on Hunger.

Mr. Leland started a number of programs designed to moderate the famine crises that cursed the countries of Ethiopia and Sudan during the 1980s. Sadly, he died in a plane crash on a mission to Ethiopia in August 1989, but he left me thinking about the solution. We have the resources and know-how to grow enough, store enough, and distribute enough food for every person on earth to be nutritionally self-sufficient from now on. Indeed, twenty-seven years after I started Terra-Genesis, in the year 2011, 172 countries have solved the issue of hunger.

With growing interest, I looked into the Peace Corps effort in Tunisia. At the time, programs were focused mainly on agriculture, fisheries, solar energy, urban renewal, and special education (as mental and physical handicaps often result from malnutrition). Because the concentrations of the nutrition program were similar to those of Terra-Genesis, I reached out to John Simmons, the Peace Corps director, in an effort to collaborate, and we did have some meetings, but nothing came out of it due to the politics of Tunisia.

In 1985, San Antonio Mayor Henry Cisneros declared October 14-20 World Food Week in conjunction with World Food Celebration and Awareness Day established by the United Nations. To raise awareness of our cause and support the eradication of hunger, Terra-Genesis held a World Food Day celebration on October 16, 1985 at San Pedro Park. Later that month, *Reader's Digest* published an article titled "Saving the Third World's Children," relaying the importance of the GOBFLIS techniques promoted by UNICEF. It seemed that there was no better time for me to have started Terra-Genesis, as it emerged amidst the global trend to fight hunger.

As Thanksgiving is a holiday that is essentially about sharing a meal with loved ones and being grateful for your blessings, Terra-Genesis made it a point for a few years to serve the less fortunate and to raise awareness for their plight by actively holding events throughout November. A week before Thanksgiving,

we hosted a Dinner for Africa event, consisting of Ethiopian cuisine, refreshments, and entertainment, with proceeds benefitting Terra-Genesis and the Africa Hunger Initiative.

Several days later, we cooked a chili dinner for our members and potential volunteers, which garnered the attendance of more than eighty people. Our Day of Thanks and Giving was held the day before Thanksgiving, during which we collected more than five hundred canned goods to donate to the San Antonio Food Bank. With the help of Pen Foods (a local grocery store), volunteers, and special appearances by entertainers and local dignitaries, the event was more successful than we had anticipated. On Thanksgiving Day, several board members volunteered at the Raul Jimenez Thanksgiving Dinner, serving dinner to the homeless. In early December, we concluded the year with a chili dinner to thank our supporters and the volunteers who had made the World Food Day and Day of Thanks and Giving successful.

Although the events were successful, I was quickly realizing that there were going to be challenges along the way that I had not anticipated. At times like this, however, I always try to reflect on advice that Kola Olutimehin gives in his book *Dream and Achieve*: “Obstacles can be scary, but this does not infer that they cannot be overcome and used as stepping stones.” I just needed to treat any challenges as stepping stones to something bigger.

“Close association with one who refuses to compromise with circumstances he does not like is an asset that can never be measured in terms of money.”

—Napoleon Hill, *Think and Grow Rich!*

In January 1985, a profile was written about me in the *San Antonio Light* newspaper, explaining Terra-Genesis’ efforts to mobilize the GOBFLIS techniques: www.tgicorp.org/atozarchivesandmore. The author’s opinion was that I was a combination of a dreamer, a schemer, and a visionary. Though he seemed skeptical of my dreams and plans, he did publicize my cause by detailing the benefits of ORT, which combats the four million annual child deaths that can be attributed to diarrheal dehydration.

As Terra-Genesis began to grow, we started to receive more publicity. Several months after I moved to an apartment near Trinity University, that school's newspaper, *The Trinitonian*, published the story "Ali Ali: Using Computers to Feed the World": www.tgicorp.org/atozarchivesandmore. In an interview for the article, I explained that people would be able to go to a CSC and sit at a computer terminal to access information about nutrition. I also explained that because I had learned how prevalent the problem of hunger was even in the United States, I would establish a prototype of a CSC in Texas before exporting my idea to Tunisia. A month later, "Computers to Fight World Hunger" was published in *Medical Gazette*, explaining my plan to network information about basic health and nutrition to rural villages worldwide. I was quoted as saying, "Information allows people to do things for themselves that the most powerful nations in the world can't do for them," which I still firmly believe.

As stated in John Naisbitt's bestseller *Megatrends*, the 1980s showed America relying less on institutional help, replacing it with self-help. Communities thrive when neighborhoods create their own crime-prevention or childcare groups rather than relying on the government; people thrive when they take responsibility for their own education and health, as in taking the initiative to quit smoking or start exercising. Dependency is a killer. Furthermore, the trend of moving from hierarchical structures to networking creates progress in society by quickly relaying information and establishing association. Major progressive movements, such as the women's rights movement or the origin of labor unions, started with networking. I thought, *Why can't the movement to end hunger be executed that way too?*

"A strong, steady burning fire ... has plenty of fuel to continue burning. Even after the fire 'goes out' the embers continue to glow and any new fuel will 'spark up' the fire and again, get it 'burning long and strong.' That is empowerment!"

—Barbara Pellegrino, *The Difference Between Motivation and Empowerment*

In the spring of 1985, we had our first major breakthrough in disseminating information and providing services for the community; we created the first prototype for the CSCs, opening its doors in May. On May 4, 1985, we opened

the first Family Well-Being Center, as we elected to call it. We wanted to create something that was similar to what Terra-Genesis would ultimately create in Tunisia and abroad, but we knew that San Antonio was not Tunisia. The structure had a similar vision but different resources than the centers in Tunisia would have. Family Well-Being Centers focused solely on health education would be situated in areas where the IMR was less than 50 per 1,000, different from the CSCs, which opened in areas where the IMR was greater than 50 per 1,000 and that housed clinic services while also providing health education.

Our first Family Well-Being Center was established at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, which is in an impoverished area of San Antonio approximately one-third Hispanic, one-third African American, and another third Anglo. The initial services offered were assistance from the Lord's Table Food Bank, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, assistance with job training, GED classes, a playground and childcare, and classes in literacy, nutrition, sanitation, breastfeeding, and basic English. We formed a partnership with the Ella Austin Health Center, which provided basic health services, including a clinic open five days a week. San Antonio Mayor Henry Cisneros commended us for our service to the community. It was our hope that this center would benefit the community in the areas of education, health, and unity.

This community center was one major step on the way to empowering people to be responsible for their health and well-being while also providing them with the tools that they would need to be successful on their own.

Despite the success of the Family Well-Being Center, Terra-Genesis was still trying to raise funds to create a center in Tunisia and to do more for San Antonio. During the summer of 1985, James McKinnis, a local photographer and former Peace Corps member, and John Tweddle, an artist, were drawn to the mission of Terra-Genesis and wanted to raise money and awareness for our well-being centers. They attempted this by taking advantage of a one-week trip with unlimited mileage provided by General Rent-a-Car, planning a 6,100-mile Guinness World Record-setting road trip (called Drive Around the USA) through twenty-two states for the week of July 23-30. They drove a Pontiac 6000 eighteen hours per day, stopping at sponsored La Quinta Motor Inns in El Paso, Los

Angeles, Denver, Chicago, New York, Atlanta, and Dallas. Unfortunately, the drive received minimal donations and attention, having been overshadowed by the first Live Aid concert; however, Mayor Cisneros proclaimed the week of the drive to be Child Survival Awareness Week, and Mayor Kirk Colyer of Balcones Heights, a small city bordering San Antonio, established July 30 as Terra-Genesis Appreciation Day.

Though I was making strides with Terra-Genesis in Texas, I could not forget my mission to establish CSCs in Tunisia. Government officials in Tunisia had contacted me to go visit with them about my vision, and I used the trip to acquire funding for my dream. In October 1985, I returned to Tunisia for three weeks. It was the first time I had seen my family in eight years. My mother was very old and had several illnesses. They tried to convince me to return to Bouficha permanently, but I knew I could not. I met with representatives from UNICEF and USAID (United States Agency for International Development) to discuss their initiatives in Tunisia. I also met with several government ministries, who discouraged my idea to create a branch of Terra-Genesis in Tunisia. A representative told me that even the minister of health did not have a computer, so there was no way to execute such a high-tech operation in remote villages. I gathered more information and learned that the lack of reliable health statistics would make my computer network useful. Dr. Mhanni, a local pediatrician, explained that there were 137 operating health clinics in Tunisia but they did not have weight scales for growth charting and the facilities' lack of heating discouraged health care during winter months. Combined with problems of contaminated water and a lack of community organization, the need for CSCs was great, but the country could not facilitate them. Even though I was faced with discouragement, I had hope for my plans in the future. I started on the path toward getting permission to create my dream of health clinics in Tunisia that would eventually come to fruition.

*“Teaching you to fish so that you never have to depend on anyone
or anything for the rest of your life.”*

In December 1985, I was inspired by news reports of the Spirit Project. *Spirit*, a multimillion-dollar ex-Navy ship, was being renovated through the efforts of universities, technical institutes, and various individuals to be transformed into a ship of mercy. I attempted to work with the Spirit Project and incorporate Terra-Genesis services on it and we became very close to actualizing my idea, but the fundraising fell through. Still, I was confident in my work for Terra-Genesis and I stayed confident and motivated. Though not all things worked out like I had planned, this did not mean that I had to give up on my dreams and vision. Rather, I decided not to let those little things that didn't work out get in my way as I moved toward achieving my dreams.

*There is no reason that you shouldn't be wealthy. There is no reason for you to believe that something as simple as money is beyond your reach or grasp.
You just need the right tools.*

Although Terra-Genesis saw some setbacks from 1983 to 1985, these years also saw some major turning points in my life. My attendance at the EST training, the creation of Terra-Genesis, the opening of the first Family Well-Being Center, and my return to Tunisia were all major events that dramatically shaped my life and the lives of others. Although Terra-Genesis had finally been born, there was still much work to be done. This was just the beginning of a journey to continue for more than thirty years.



Ben with his mom, Rebeh, in 1985, in front of the land where they grew up



Ben's Uncle Mtir with his wife, Romdhana, and his daughter, Mtira



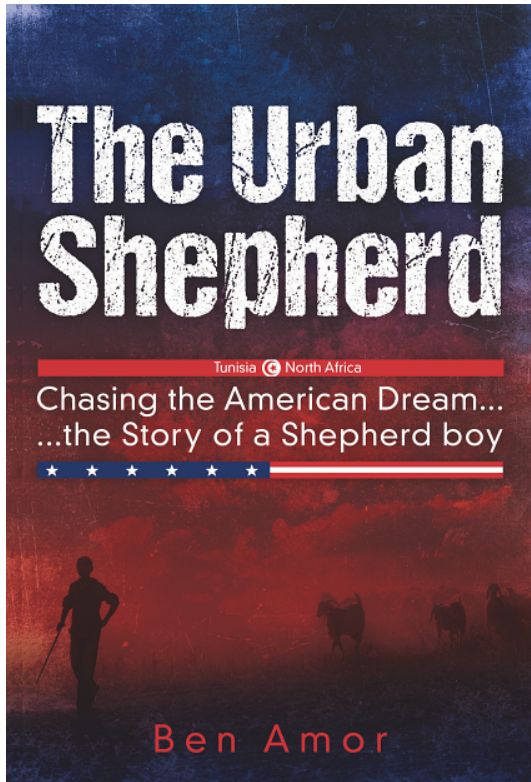
Ben's half-sister Tounes cooking elhasidah (flour mix)



Mom on the left, waiting for the train to travel to Tunis



Mehdeb and his wife, Gazala (they hosted my mom after my dad died)



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