



The Ambassador of *Good*

The world knows him as a music phenomenon, but for some of the world's children Ricky Martin is a great benefactor. He's also the **Hispanic of the Year**.

BY MARISSA RODRIGUEZ



and without concern for getting his hands dirty. He is more than willing to work in the thick of it. For years Martin, 36, has labored to raise awareness in an effort to end one of the world's most widespread and difficult to understand phenomena: the illegal transport, exploitation and, sometimes, sale of people. Women and children are the most vulnerable to this almost unimaginable crime, and often the result is sexual exploitation. And this problem, human trafficking is worldwide.

Through the development of The Ricky Martin Foundation, of which he is president and founder, Martin has forged numerous alliances, projects and partnerships with other organizations. His willingness to speak on behalf of victims and to address world leaders has accomplished much—not only in raising awareness among policymakers and lay people, but also in getting resources to those most defenseless to human trafficking. In the process, he has become an ambassador for children and has positioned himself as an expert in the field.

In an interview with *Hispanic*, Martin revealed not only his deep devotion to the issue, but also a thoughtful, smart and philosophical side to himself. Currently on sabbatical after becoming a father to twin baby boys via a surrogate mother in late August, in much-reported news, Martin is taking a break

from the spotlight. But he still takes time to discuss why he chose human trafficking as his cause and what he and his foundation are doing to combat it.

"We believe that human trafficking is the most vicious violation of human rights," Martin says. "Unfortunately 1.2 million children are trafficked every year for exploitation purposes such as forced labor, sexual exploitation, prostitution and servitude. It's unacceptable that modern day slavery still occurs today."

It's a lucrative business, however. According to UNICEF, human trafficking generates \$10 billion annually (though some figures put estimate \$12 to \$32 billion). Only illicit drug and weapons trafficking are more profitable. People are trafficked mainly for prostitution and forced labor. And, when children are involved, most are trafficked for sexual exploitation, domestic work, labor and to become child soldiers. The U.S. State Department estimates that 1 million children are initiated into the global sex trade yearly.

For Martin, it was a 2002 trip to India that opened his eyes to the situation. In his testimony in February at the Vienna Forum, an initiative by the United Nations to fight human trafficking, Martin described three young girls living on the streets in plastic bags. It was an experience he described as

Celebrities and charitable and philanthropic causes have a lengthy relationship, dating back to Bob Hope's decades-long devotion to entertaining troops during wartime and Jerry Lewis' telethons raising money for children with muscular dystrophy. The tradition continues today, though for some, the game has changed. With their power to influence fans and beckon the attention of the media, charitable causes have become fuel. Knowing do-gooding makes good news, many modern stars adopt causes quickly and discard them as soon as the red carpet has been rolled up behind them. And, their closest link to their pet cause: is the gala being hosted in their name.

This is where Ricky Martin differs. The Puerto Rican pop star, who carved his place into Spanish- and English-language music history, has entered the realm of philanthropy with a fervent passion for the wellbeing of children,



Here and there: Martin visits with children in Guatemala.



FATHERHOOD HAS REINFORCED MY MISSION AND MY RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD THIS MOST VULNERABLE POPULATION.

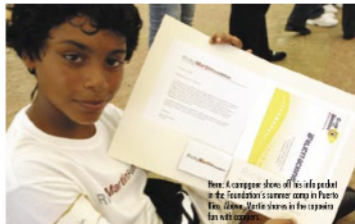
humbly. With the help of friends, Martín rescued the girls and delivered them to a safe house in their native country. Considering he was in a foreign country and dealing with a lucrative black market, the act was exceptionally brave.

"Once you learn about the gruesome reality of this crime, there is no turning back," he says. Martín, who by this time had established his foundation in Puerto Rico, was already fully invested in the welfare of children. Instead of stopping there, he used the moment as a catalyst for more action. That same year he was named a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador.

"After rescuing various girls from falling prey to the world's third most lucrative criminal activity (human trafficking), I had the opportunity to visit Washington, D.C. and met with activists," he says. "Two years later, the Foundation launched People for Children as its principal project in order to educate and support international efforts to end this atrocity."

Created in 2004, the People for Children's effort is the RMF (Ricky Martín Foundation) flagship initiative, combating human trafficking while placing emphasis on children. Since its development it has ushered in several programs, from 1-800 numbers where people can call for resources to Public Service Announcements in which Martín shares his insight into this troublesome problem.

Although Martín uses his celebrity to



raise awareness of the issues, he is less inclined to use it toward furthering his own stardom or even influencing the charitable choices of other celebrities. Yet it's these very good works that have earned him praise from some of the most important philanthropic organization the world over. For instance in 2005, he, former Mexican first lady Martha Fox and Queen Noor of Jordan were bestowed the International Humanitarian Award by the International Center for Missing and Exploited Children. But, when asked whether he ponders his fame and his legacy, the answer is almost a shrug, "Not really."

"My commitment towards this cause was born from a humbling experience," he says. "To see other public figures working as activists was always inspiring, and to see new ones adopting new causes is good for humankind. But in the end, it is a very personal decision."

With that in mind, five-time Grammy winner Martín still follows suit with other big name Latin American celebrity philanthropists and mixes business with pleasure. In May, Martín took his place on stage alongside stars Shakira, Junes, Maná, Miguel Bosé, Calle 13, Juan Luis Guerra, Alejandro Sanz and more for the ALAS Concert for Children. The two live concerts, one in Mexico City and the other in Buenos Aires, drew crowds of more than 380,000 and TV viewers in the millions throughout Latin America. In addition to raising awareness, the concert raised \$200 million in two giant lump donations.

"The concert allowed us to create awareness about the injustice children face in Latin America. Definitely music, like philanthropy, bridges hope."

It seems Martín and his foundation are in the business of hope. In addition to RMF's goals of fighting for children's social justice,

education and health, their great hope, says Martin, is to enforce their basic human rights by working in partnership with other organizations, corporations and individuals.

In Puerto Rico, the foundation is hard at work building hope locally. For example, its annual summer camp takes disadvantaged children and teaches them the Brazilian martial art capoeira, supports music in schools, and has established a scholarship program for low-income students to enroll in medical school.

The 2004 rescue of the Indian girls and their safe placement is one of Martin's proudest achievements, and in a career full of accolades, awards and millions of fans, his selection is telling.

"It's difficult to choose a moment, but I could say that when one of the little girls that we rescued selected December 24 (my birthday) as her birthday, I felt honored," he says. "And just recently in our visit to Cambodia, an adolescent survivor told me, 'I thank you. Keep doing your humanitarian work.' Priceless inspirational moments."

The foundation, and Martin himself, have made enormous strides in the eradication of human trafficking and international child welfare, but there is still more to do. After his trip to Vienna to address the UN Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (U.N. GIFT), Martin learned that changing attitudes and human behavior is difficult. However, "the fact that thousands of organizations, governments and corporations were able to put this crime on the global agenda only reinforces our mission." Undeterred, a month later he took his mission to Cambodia, where child sexual exploitation is rampant, to meet with government officials and visit anti-trafficking projects sponsored by NGOs.

After all this, it's perhaps fitting that the man who toils on behalf of children would become a father himself and bring his role of international caretaker into his home. "Fatherhood reinforces my mission and my responsibility towards this most vulnerable population," he says.

In a way, his work has come full circle, but if his past works are any indication, there is much more to come from Martin and his foundation. The hard road traveled and the work ahead has made one thing clear to Ricky Martin: "Life is an ever-changing journey that has taught me to always be thankful." ■



Ricky Martin in Cambodia.

A WORLD of Accomplishments

TOGETHER WITH HIS FOUNDATION, RICKY MARTIN HAS ACHIEVED MUCH FOR CHILDREN AND THE POOR, ALONG THE WAY BOTH HAVE COLLECTED INCREDIBLE ACCOLADES FROM SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST PRESTIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS.

2000: Martin breaks ground and establishes the Ricky Martin Foundation.

2002: On a trip to India, Martin rescues three girls from child prostitution and places them in a safe home. The foundation and SER de Puerto Rico establish the Ricky Martin Rehabilitation Center providing therapy to children with physical disabilities. The Hispanic Heritage Association awards Martin a Hispanic Heritage Award for his work in the Arts.

2004: RMF creates the People for Children Campaign to fight global child exploitation. Martin becomes a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador.

2005: Martin becomes the first Latin American to sign a partnership with Habitat for Humanity. The U.S. Department of State names Martin an International Hero in its annual Trafficking of Persons Report. The foundation and Habitat for Humanity build 224 houses for victims of the tsunami in Thailand.

2006: Martin takes home the Person of the Year Award from the Latin Recording Academy. He addresses the House International Relations Committee during a child trafficking hearing on Capitol Hill.

2007: Martin receives a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, while the foundation in association, with the IDB and others, launch the *Umea y Vive* campaign, which launches on more than 90 investigations into exploitation.

2008: Martin, alongside other celebrities and global leaders, participates as a child advocate in the Vienna Forum, organized by the United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking. He also participates in the POCER Philanthropy Forum speaking about his travels and experience. The RMF launches an online awareness program in Panama, Mexico and Bolivia called *Navega Protegido*. Martin is named Hispanic magazine's Hispanic of the Year.