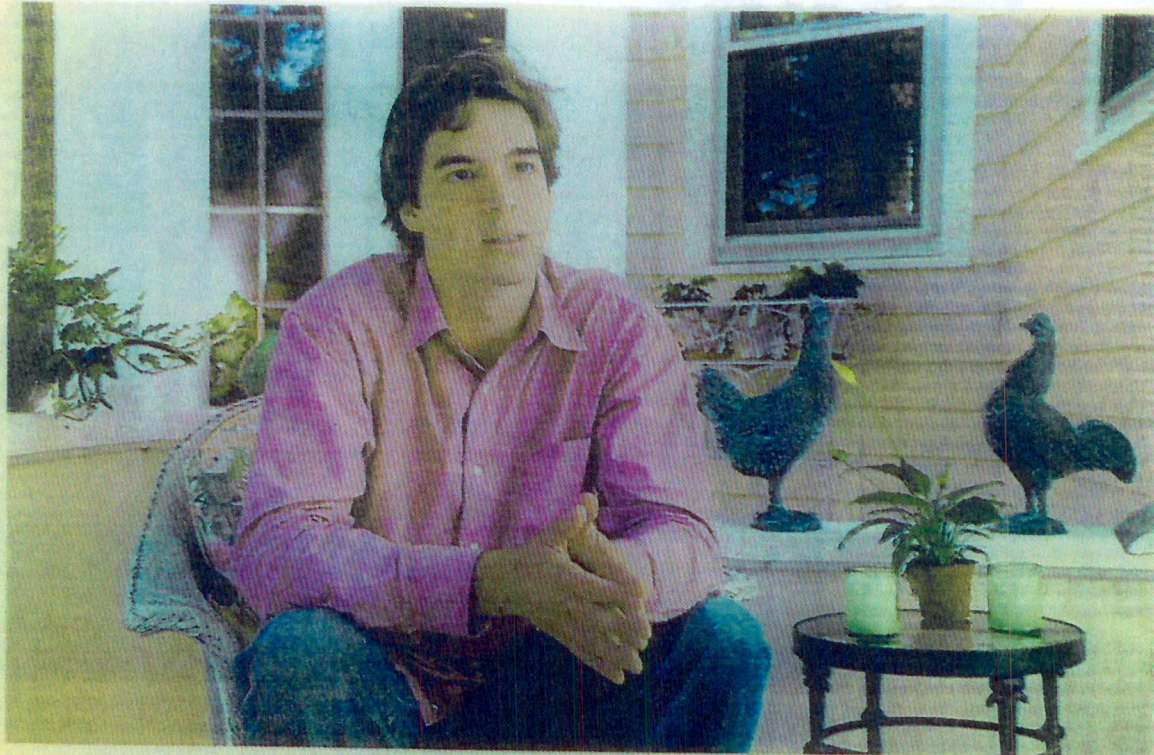


Living Arts

THE BOSTON GLOBE SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2004



GLOBE PHOTO/STEVE MILLER

China Care Foundation president Matt Dalio returns to Harvard College to begin his junior year next week.

A bridge to China

Harvard junior Matt Dalio's foundation goes the distance for orphans

By Joseph P. Kahn
GLOBE STAFF

GREENWICH, Conn. — Down the block from Matt Dalio's house, in a neighborhood of landscaped lawns and investment bankers' homes, stands the Belle Haven Club, where members play tennis in spotless whites and revel in the good life.

Last night, the club was the scene of a private party featuring Sheryl Crow and Buddy Guy. Dalio, the host, promised beforehand it would be a "killer" affair, the kind of bash where the tanned and wealthy gather to feel good about themselves at summer's end.

And he should know, having grown up in a world of privilege himself.

Yet Dalio, 20, a Harvard College junior, has seen another world, too, one as different from trust-fund suburbia as one could find and still be

on the same planet. So while guests boogied down with Buddy and Sheryl, their dollars were diverted to a cause that has become Dalio's life mission: helping disabled Chinese orphans earn a chance at their own version of the good life.

From humble beginnings, Dalio's 4-year-old China Care Foundation has grown into a multi-purpose organization providing a range of services in both China and the United States. From pediatric surgeries to foster-home placements to financial aid for adopting families, China Care helps the neediest of China's children in many ways, all due to Dalio's persistence and passion.

One such child is Grace Liacopoulos, guest of honor at last year's fund-raiser. Grace, 7, was born with a disfiguring skin condition that made her an unpromising candidate for adoption. With the help of China Care, she now lives with a

DALIO, Page C4

'I love... creating the vision and pulling it all together. Making it real... Still, it does have its downsides.'

MATT DALIO, Harvard junior and president of the China Care Foundation

Harvard junior makes world of difference to Chinese orphans

► DALIO

Continued from Page C1

loving Wisconsin family. Skin-graft surgery has helped correct her condition. And Dalio, who first held Grace in a Tianjin orphanage 4 years ago and instantly fell in love, is now her godfather.

At Belle Haven, she was the belle of the ball.

"Close contact with Grace makes me see the magic of what we're doing," Dalio says emotionally during an interview at his Connecticut home. "She's an amazing girl in every way."

Kellie Liacopoulos, Grace's adoptive mother, agrees — adding that Dalio in many ways is even more amazing. On Grace's last birthday, she says, Dalio dropped everything, flew to Wisconsin to spend two days with the family, and spent his spare time cramming for exams.

"There's not a Chinese kid that man does not care about," Kellie Liacopoulos marvels. "I've often wondered why Matt does this — he could have gone to China, loved it, come back, and gotten on with his life — but he has a huge heart. He's the most responsible, most organized, most energetic human being I've ever seen."

Bold moves

Dalio's work has been the subject of an Oprah Winfrey show, and his vision has inspired numerous campus chapters in the United States, including one at Harvard, where the Dumplings, as the children are nicknamed, are encouraged to honor their Chinese heritage, not run from it.

At last night's party, guests were to have watched a video about the foundation's latest initiatives and bid on auction items donated by supporters. For Dalio, it was a final blast before returning to campus next week. A psychology and economics major and Kirkland House resident, Dalio works on the Harvard Crimson staff but otherwise devotes much of his extracurricular efforts to China Care.

"The main purpose is to thank our donors, particularly ones from this community who've been so supportive," says Dalio, sitting on his back porch going over party plans. Last year's benefit, with B.B. King and Jeff Beck, drew 350 guests and netted \$275,000. This year's party is expected to exceed those totals. To date, Dalio and his allies have raised more than \$1 million. The foundation recently hired its first China-based executive director, thanks to the generosity of Dalio's loyal supporters.

Hobbling on crutches from a

broken ankle, Dalio admits that his attention is shifting back toward campus life. Seldom, though, do his thoughts stray far from the cause that has gripped him since grade school. He calls it "preaching the joys of special-needs adoption."

At age 3, Dalio made his first trip to China, accompanied by his father, an international investment manager. At 11, he returned to spend the school year overseas, living with family friends in Beijing. It was a bold move for a sixth-grader, even one as adventuresome as Dalio. But it planted the seed for what has followed.

"It's important to see other cultures, but there's a real advantage to doing it while you're young and malleable," reflects Dalio, recalling how ostracized he felt initially. "At 11, you think, 'OK, that's how they do things here. Cool.' But at first it was kind of lonely and scary, too."

Not only did he adjust, says Dalio, who speaks near-fluent Mandarin, he also cultivated a deep appreciation for cultural differences between East and West. Meanwhile, he formed a lasting bond with Gu Zeqing, his surrogate Chinese mother. Gu, who worked for the same firm as Dalio's father, became instrumental in launching China Care and serves as a foundation director.

Dalio returned to China when he was 16 and worked in an orphanage, where the magnitude of the adoption problem became evident. Dalio sought advice from local child-welfare organizations. Ninety-five percent of Chinese orphans suffer from some form of disability, Dalio learned, making them virtually unadoptable. Yet relatively minor surgeries, such as procedures to correct a cleft palate, can spell the difference between institutionalization and adoption. The farther one travels from China's cities to more rural areas, Dalio discovered, the worse conditions became.

"I went there thinking I wanted to do something," he recalls, breaking into a smile. "I came back wanting to start something."

He did not start modestly. With his father's encouragement, Dalio set the bar high: no bake sales or car washes. Instead, he solicited five-figure contributions from neighbors and friends. "For the cost of a latte a day, you can change a life," Dalio said, in a pitch he still makes to whomever will listen.

It did not hurt that he is tall, dark, and handsome. Also humble.

Lisa Valley, a Greenwich



GLOBE PHOTO/STEVE MILLER

Matt Dalio first traveled to China at age 3. A trip he took there at age 16 helped inspire him to start an organization to help Chinese orphans.

neighbor, has known Dalio since he was 7. She was among the first to be approached for foundation funding and says saying "no" to Dalio's pitch was not an option for her.

"He left for China a young boy and returned a young man," says Valley. "In a town that's bombarded with benefits, where people are constantly being asked for money — and big money too — China

Care was not on top of everyone's list." But she adds: "Matt would not back down a bit. His enthusiasm is incredible."

Depth of commitment

The third of four brothers, Dalio attended The Brunswick School in Greenwich, where he worked on the school yearbook and took up rock climbing for recreation. Most of his spare time

went to starting the foundation, though. "I tried to lead a normal life, but my friends thought I was a little obsessive," he says. "They'd say, 'Let's go party.' But they got more interested when they saw the depth of my commitment."

As foundation president, Dalio, who goes to China once or twice a year, often makes tough choices about allocating resources. Does this 2-year-old get

facial surgery? Can this 4-year-old be made to walk again? "It's like playing God sometimes," Dalio admits.

In March 2002, Dalio appeared on Oprah's TV show. Already primed for growth, he says, the foundation received thousands of phone calls and e-mails. Extending assistance to families hoping to adopt — a process that can cost between \$16,000 and \$20,000 — was now possible. The first to receive aid were Peter and Kellie Liacopoulos, who had previously adopted two blind girls from China. They brought Grace home in early 2003.

Since 2003, nearly 50 families have received loans and grants. One hundred cleft palate/cleft lip surgeries are currently being sponsored. A separate program places handicapped children in Chinese foster homes. This year China Care opened its first children's home, in Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi province, where the foundation is also renovating an existing orphanage.

Additionally, China Care publishes a newsletter, maintains a website (chinacare.org), and sponsors a network of support groups for adoptees, one of which operates out of the First Congregational Church in Cambridge. Ten volunteers from the Harvard China Care Club traveled to China this summer to work in orphanages. Other volunteers, from Greenwich housewives to occupational therapists, have visited China this summer under foundation auspices doing the one-on-one work.

Dalio is still two years away from a college degree. While the foundation will always be his passion, he says, he will likely explore other career options. Business school, real estate, or venture philanthropy are possibilities.

And yes, he realizes that as the foundation grows, his ability to manage it might wane.

"I love that part of it, creating the vision and pulling it all together," he says. "Making it real — holding Grace in my arms is real. Still, it does have its downsides. How do we prevent it from becoming a managerial nightmare? I don't know."

The blueprint may come from one of Dalio's mentors, New York investment manager Paul Jones. Jones founded the Robin Hood Foundation, which sponsors anti-poverty programs in the New York City area.

"I love the model," says Dalio. "It's a huge foundation, but he also runs his own business. My aim is to stay involved with China Care but pursue other goals."