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Subject: Fwd: NYT: Bill Gates's Next Big Thing

FYI.

Bill Gates's Next Big Thing

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

Published: January 24, 2009

SEATTLE

Here's a paradox: In these brutal economic times, one of the leading advocates for the world's poorest people is one of the richest.

Bill Gates will publish his first "annual letter" on Monday outlining his work on his twin passions — health and development in the poorest nations and education in America — and calling for the United States to do more even during this economic crisis. I came here to Seattle for an advance peek at the letter and to ask how he is adjusting to his transition from tycoon to philanthropist.

Mr. Gates ended his full-time presence at Microsoft last July and since then has thrown himself into work at his foundation. He is now trying to do to malaria, AIDS, polio and lethal childhood diarrhea what he did to Netscape, and he just may succeed.

He does seem to be going through withdrawal, for software engineering was his passion. "I miss that," he said, but added that he is becoming equally maniacal (that's his word) about poverty and education.

Mr. Gates and his wife, Melinda, are already having an effect on the developing world that is simply transformative. Just one of their investments, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations, has saved more than three million lives since

2000.

That's a down payment.

In 1960, almost 20 million children died annually before age 5, Mr. Gates notes. There are more children today, yet the death toll has been halved to under 10 million annually. Now his goal is to see it halved again, saving an additional five million children's lives annually.

"We're on the verge of some big advances," Mr. Gates said. In particular, a promising malaria vaccine will enter its final phase of human trials this year, with others behind it. Mr. Gates said he is "absolutely confident" that a successful malaria vaccine will be achieved, probably within a half dozen years, and an AIDS vaccine 10 or more years from now.

Look, I'm a cynical journalist, and I don't want to sound too infatuated. I think the Gates Foundation has missed the chance to leverage the revolution in social entrepreneurship, hasn't been as effective in advocacy as it has been in research, and has missed an opportunity to ignite a broad social movement behind its issues.

But if Mr. Gates manages to accomplish as much in the world of vaccines, health and food production as he thinks he can, then the consequences will be staggering. Squared. In that case, the first few paragraphs of Mr. Gates's obituary will be all about overcoming diseases and poverty, barely mentioning his earlier career in the software industry.

Mr. Gates said he got the idea for an annual letter from Warren Buffett, who writes such a letter ruminating about investments and the business world. (You can sign up to get Mr. Gates's letter, or read it beginning Monday, at www.gatesfoundation.org.)

In the letter, Mr. Gates goes out of his way to acknowledge setbacks. For example, the Gates Foundation made a major push for smaller high schools in the United States, often helping to pay for the creation of small schools within larger buildings.

"Many of the small schools that we invested in did not improve students' achievement in any significant way," he acknowledges. Small schools succeeded when the principal was able to change teachers, curriculum and culture, but smaller size by itself proved disappointing. "In most cases," he says, "we fell short."

Mr. Gates comes across as a strong education reformer, focusing on supporting charter schools and improving teacher quality. He suggested that when he has nailed down the evidence more firmly, he will wade into the education debates.

"It is amazing how big a difference a great teacher makes versus an ineffective one," Mr. Gates writes in his letter. "Research shows that there is only half as much variation in student achievement between schools as there is among classrooms in the same school. If you want your child to get the best education possible, it is actually more important to get him assigned to a great teacher than to a great school."

Mr. Gates told me he was optimistic that President Obama would make progress on these issues, notwithstanding the economic crisis, and he noted that the downturn had only added to the need for foreign assistance and education spending. "The poorer you are, the worse the impact is," he said.

I asked Mr. Gates what advice he had for ordinary readers who might want to engage in micro-philanthropy.

"The key thing is to pick a cause, whether its crops or diseases or great high schools," he said. "Pick one and get some more in-depth knowledge." If possible, travel to see the problems firsthand, then pick an organization to support with donations or volunteer time.

So try it. The only difference between you and Mr. Gates is scale.

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