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T U R K

TURK PIPKIN IS  
CHANGING  
THE WORLD  
ONE PEACE  
AT A TIME.

*By Steve Uhler  
Photos by Cody Hamilton  
Makeup by Jenny Lin,  
makeupbyjennylin.com*

Many men seek the meaning of life while taking the path of least resistance, but Turk Pipkin chose another course. He built his own road.

You probably know Turk Pipkin, even if you don't know him personally. Google his name and be confronted with a seemingly endless list of careers and credentials: author, actor, filmmaker, juggler, photographer, magician, activist, producer and all-around human perpetual-motion machine. Many remember him as the born-again narcoleptic, Aaron Arkaway, in *The Sopranos*, or as the writer and director of the award-winning films *Nobelity*, *One Peace at a Time* and his latest, *Building Hope*, the companion piece to his impressive and inspiring new coffee-table book of the same name. But Pipkin's most lasting legacy is probably something that he never really set out to do: He is changing the world, one peace at a time.

Turk Pipkin is juggling a lot of projects these days, but that's no surprise. He is, after all, a former professional juggler, proficient at keeping several plates in the air at once. On the afternoon we visit, he's wrapping up a lunchtime meeting with an associate about the logistics of constructing a water well in Kenya, receiving news of a nomination for a prestigious architectural award, fielding text messages from throughout the world and contending with bureaucratic red tape regarding an impending international shipment of classroom computers. On top of all that, he's gearing up for the Artists and Filmmakers Dinner gala at the Four Seasons on March 25, an annual event in which he holds a vested interest.

At 6 feet 7 inches, Pipkin is one of the few people in Texas who can literally look down on Ray Benson.

"Turk is a talented Texan and we're all proud that he's used those talents to help people all over the world," testifies longtime friend Willie Nelson. He adds, "If he gives me another hundred bucks, I'll also say he's good looking."

Film producer Fred Miller observes, "He's a very tall Energizer bunny."

Just who is this alliteratively named, multi-tasking,

middle-age wunderkind, and how did a former court jester for the counterculture morph in to a social and global force to be reckoned with? From his days as a struggling street performer to building schools on the other side of the world, the unlikely trajectory of Turk Pipkin's multi-everything life can be measured in analogous increments: one tree at a time, one child at a time, and—as the title of his second movie suggests—one peace at a time. It's a recurring metaphorical mantra that he benignly exploits in both his art and his life. Seemingly unrelated events and skills weave together in to improbable designs and cathartic destinies, one thread at a time.

The youngest but certainly tallest of five siblings, Pipkin led an idyllic Texas Hill Country boyhood at his grandmother's ranch on the South Llano River. The preternaturally outsized boy spent his days fishing, shooting hoops and, in a harbinger of things to come, investing endless hours pursuing his passion.

"I was always reading about Nobelists," Pipkin says. "I would go to the library and look up lists of Nobel laureates and then go look for books by them. I wanted to be a writer since I was really young. I didn't know who to write for, so I wrote for myself."

In high school, the aspiring young writer discovered a heretofore-untapped propensity for theatrics.

"I was a ham, a class clown. I told jokes, I did magic tricks and I juggled," he says, adding that he also discovered a genetic ace in the hole that literally set him head and shoulders above his peers. "For a guy my size, it wasn't just that I was a good juggler; I was a 6-foot-7-inch guy who was a good juggler."

After graduating, Pipkin half-heartedly enrolled at the University of Texas, but left after one year to join the Navy. Stationed in San Diego, he spent most of his



[As told by Turk]  
 ▲ A favorite pic by my buddy Dan Shine. I filmed in 25 countries for *One Peace at a Time*. Two hundred hours of footage and 30,000 pics.  
 ► Lucky me! To celebrate our 25th anniversary and Christy beating cancer a second time, we renewed our vows in Paris in the Rose Garden of Notre Dame with Katie and Lilly officiating.



off-duty hours performing on the streets, honing his skills and cultivating crowds.

"I had long hair, but you couldn't make money as a street performer with a navy haircut," he recalls, "so I wore a short-hair wig on the ship, and pulled my Navy cap down over my wig."

It was an early manifestation of Pipkin's uncanny ability to adapt and reinvent himself. Aboard ship, he was a regulation-issue, buttoned-down sailor; off-duty, he was a longhaired hippie juggler with a ponytail.

Top photo by Dan Shine.

Drifting back to Austin after his stint, Pipkin hooked up with another free spirit, fellow comic and magician Harry Anderson.

"I bumped in to this ridiculously huge, goofy-as-hell, impossibly monikered guy," recalls Anderson. "In all that while, one or the other of us just wouldn't go away."

The two became fast friends, collaborating together and performing on the road. About the same time, Pipkin also met up with a petite young artist from Dallas named Christy Ellinger.

"She was a dancer. She used to perform with a lot of bands," Pipkin recalls. "I'm 6 feet 7 inches, she's 5 feet 1 inch. It's not like you look at each other and go, 'There's my life's mate.'"

The two married in 1984. Pipkin continued busking in Austin, directionless but content, occasionally doing volunteer work for an up-and-coming candidate for county treasurer named Ann Richards, a connection that would prove fruitful later on. Meanwhile, pal Anderson was ditching town for the West Coast.

"He said, 'I'm going to move to L.A. and be a TV star,' and he did," Pipkin remembers. "Two, maybe three years later, he's on the first episode of *Cheers* as Harry the Hat. So I followed him to L.A. The day after *Cheers* premiered, a stack of scripts came over to the house from his agent for Harry to read. He looked at a few of 'em and said, 'This stuff's awful!' and threw them in the trashcan. He said, 'These guys want me to do my own show. You're in charge of scripts and finding a show.' I pulled a script called *Night Court* out of the trash. I said, 'I think you need to read this.'"

*Night Court* took off, Anderson became a mainstream star and Turk Pipkin suddenly found himself a respected TV writer and producer. It was a scattered but productive time, writing and producing TV specials, penning quirky how-to books, collaborating on projects with Willie Nelson, flexing his acting chops with a recurring role on *The Sopranos* and in small parts in such movies as *Waiting For Guffman* and *Friday Night Lights*.

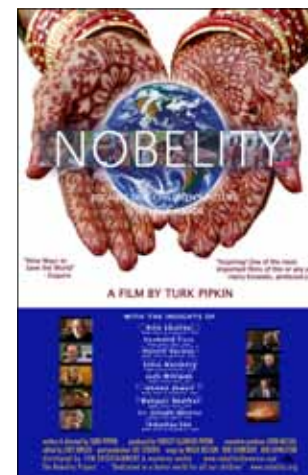
"I was doing what I wanted to do. I was having a great time," Pipkin says. "Looking back, I'm not sure that was the smartest business approach but, you know, how do you learn to do stuff? You just go do it." And then the world changed.

The evolution from in-demand TV writer, producer and performer to international social activist is best recounted in Pipkin's beautiful book, *Building Hope*. The nutshell version goes something like this: When wife Christy was diagnosed with cancer in 2000, the couple began taking a deeper look at what they were doing in their lives and work. Months later, the events of 9/11 had a devastating impact on oldest daughter Katie, who began having recurring nightmares and asking hard questions about what would happen to children like her in other parts of the world.

As Pipkin recounts in his book, "Christy and I had unique skill sets in work, as well as in life, but our 15 years of television comedy and awards shows suddenly seemed pointless. With our combined skills, shouldn't we be doing something more relevant? I had a fairly broad knowledge about the world and its problems, and I was taken with an idea that stood in opposition to almost all documentaries. Rather than focus on a specific issue or story, I wanted to look at the world as a whole and try to present some kind of informed view of the kind of future my kids would know."

Thus was born the idea of a film project fueled by

## ◀ NOBELITY FILM TRILOGY ▶



### NOBELITY (2006)

The spark that started it all, Pipkin's debut documentary looks at the world's most pressing problems as seen through the eyes of nine Nobel laureates. Traveling the globe for enlightening one-on-one sit-downs with such cerebral heavyweights as Jody Williams, Mangari Maathai and Desmond Tutu, Pipkin serves as on-screen tour guide, interviewer and surrogate everyman in this compelling call to action. Lauded by *Esquire* as "nine ways to save the world," *Nobelity* is a cinematic primer for both macro problems and possibilities, at once disquieting and inspiring.



### ONE PEACE AT A TIME (2009)

Billed as "a film about a messed-up world and how to fix it," Pipkin's follow-up to *Nobelity* continues his global journey, expanding on the earlier film's themes and broadening the scope with a focus on children's rights. Pipkin visits more than 20 countries, conducting new interviews and checking in on projects with such organizations as Architecture for Humanity, CARE and The Miracle Foundation. As a tonic to the sometimes-heady conversation, Willie Nelson drops by for a game of chess and some pertinent Willie-isms.



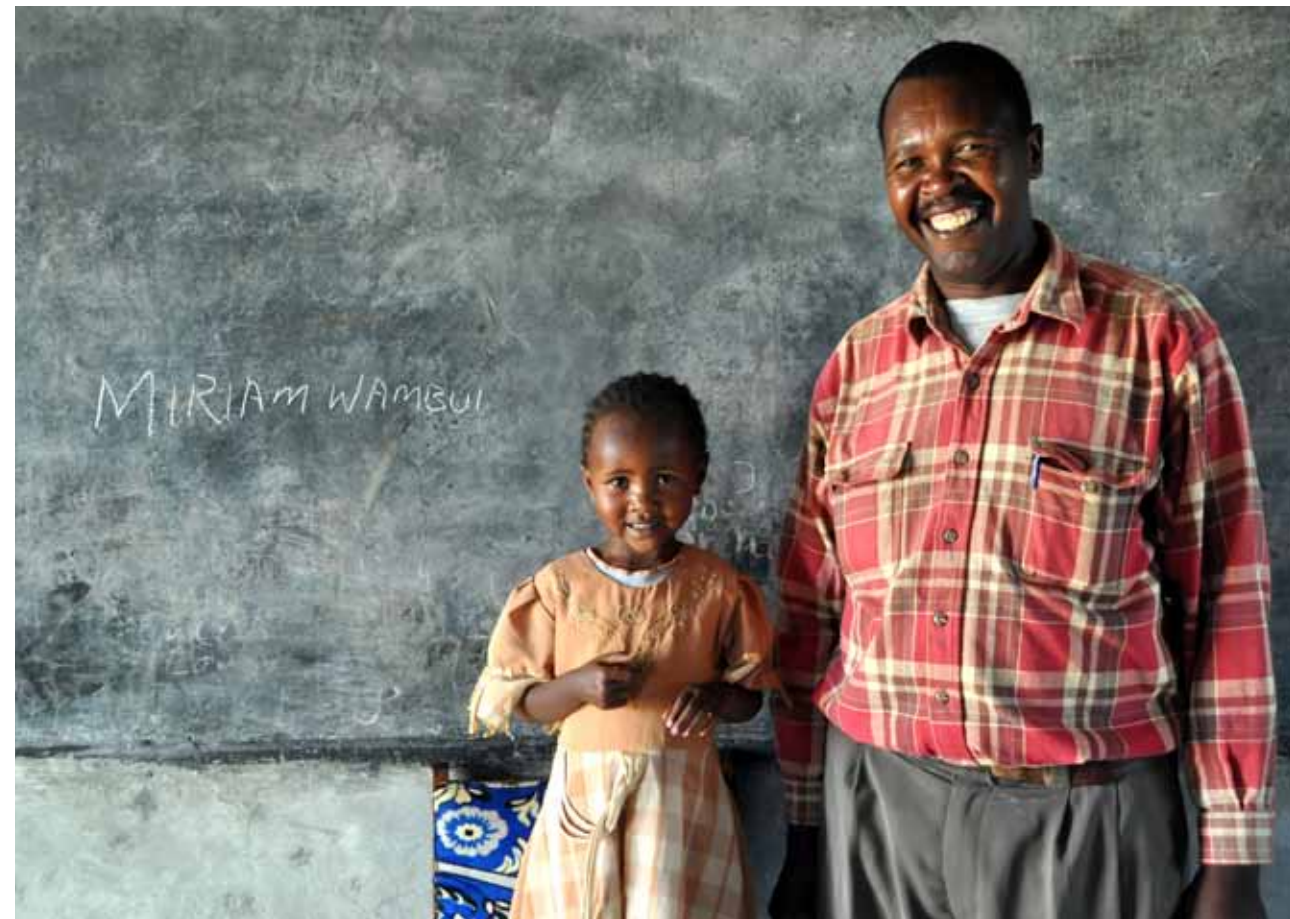
### BUILDING HOPE (2011)

The final film in Pipkin's *Nobelity* video triptych, *Building Hope* documents the evolution of Mahiga Hope High School, from planting the first tree to the joyous opening-day celebration. The film is currently only available as a DVD insert companion piece to the equally impressive deluxe book of the same title. ("The most expensive DVD packaging ever," Pipkin says, only half-kidding.) The film soars in its luminous Beautiful World montage and in its charming on-camera interaction with the school's irresistible kids. The book's a keeper too.



▲ My first visit to Mahiga Primary School, after planting 100 trees with the students. The school has planted 7,000 trees on the grounds. The new seedlings behind these kids are now 20 feet tall.

► Two giraffes at the Aberdare Game Preserve. Mahiga Hope High School is on the hill in the far distance.



◀ Joseph Mutongu with his daughter Miriam, Mahiga Hope High School Class of 2023.

▼ Rain coming toward the RainWater Court. Two inches of rain collect 30,000 liters of purified rainwater for Mahiga Hope High School.



Bottom left and right photos by Turk Pipkin.

such influential cheerleaders as Ann Richards, who had moved up significantly since her days stumping for treasurer. Four years after his initial pitch, Pipkin had landed on-camera interviews with nine different Nobel winners, filmed in locales throughout the globe.

The resulting documentary, *Nobelity*, drew critical kudos but scant audiences.



▲ Big fun for any actor from Texas, playing Alamo defender Isaac Millsaps, leader of the “Immortal 32” from Goliad, and I got to gallop into the Alamo pursued by Mexican Lancers.

Maathai, the first African female Nobel laureate, to come plant a tree in her native country prompted a trip to the Aberdare Mountain region of Central Kenya and the tiny hilltop village of Mahiga. Pipkin spent a memorable afternoon dedicated to planting a

“We opened the same day as Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*,” Pipkin recalls with a resigned sigh. “They smashed us.”

Gore’s high-profile documentary created controversy, questions and massive ticket sales. *Nobelity* offered positive answers but generated few box-office receipts.

Still, the ripple effect generated by *Nobelity* set game-changing events in to motion.

An invitation from Wangari Maathai, the first African female Nobel laureate, to come plant a tree in her native country prompted a trip to the Aberdare Mountain region of Central Kenya and the tiny hilltop village of Mahiga. Pipkin spent a memorable afternoon dedicated to planting a

grove of trees at the nearby village school. By the end of the day, he ended up with a lot more invested in his journey than a pocketful of seeds. St. Joseph’s Mahiga Primary School had originally been built by the Catholic Church in the 1970s, but had fallen in to disrepair. A barely standing structure of rotting slatted walls, broken windows and mud floors, the ramshackle schoolhouse had no electricity, sparse supplies and no purified water. But the students were another story. Pipkin was deeply inspired by the gaggle of grinning children, who regarded this giant white Panda bear of a man with giddy awe and attention. There’s nothing that can delight a child like a visiting uncle who can pull a coin out of your ear, and Pipkin was instantly adopted by the students.

Among other insights during his visit, he discovered that planting a tree is a very empowering thing. He also learned that, in Kenya, government-provided education for children pretty much ended at the secondary school level. A total of 366 kids attended the primary school, up to level eight. Once these kids graduated, there would be very little chance of going on to high school and, hence, bleak prospects for their future.

Walking the grounds, Pipkin wondered why several of the existing trees on the property were turning brown and dying. The reason, he discovered, was a lack of clean water; the nearest source was a polluted stream nearly two miles away. The village children charged with watering the trees had to carry the tainted water uphill, a tedious and time-consuming process, causing many to miss out on precious classroom time.

Before leaving Mahiga, Pipkin made a spontaneous promise to the school’s headmaster to return and, somehow, provide clean water for the school. Returning home to Austin, Pipkin told Christy about his pledge. With nominal funding from *Nobelity* and various supporters, the pair formed The Nobevity Project, an outreach educational nonprofit created to make movies that make a difference. Pro-

ceeds from the Austin premiere of Pipkin’s follow-up to *Nobelity*, *One Peace at a Time*, were earmarked for Mahiga. Pipkin also enlisted the aid of an assortment of supporters and specialists, with the villagers themselves volunteering to handle all the hard labor.

Three years, one movie and countless frequent flier miles after his pledge, Pipkin returned to the school to find a new water room, furnished with a pump and filter system, and a 15,000-liter storage tank filled to the brim with rainwater. As a young boy opened the tap and filled the first ceremonial glass, Pipkin savored a sip from the fruits of his labor.

“I had never tasted anything so sweet,” he says.

He could have patted himself on the back and moved on to the next film project, but Pipkin had become irrevocably invested with the welfare of his newly adopted family of students. Now that they had a clean water-storage system, the next logical step in his mind was to build a functional high school for the village.

“I thought he was nuts,” says Christy Pipkin, long since accustomed to her husband’s Quixote-like mix of fearlessness and resolve.

Pipkin began laying the foundation of continued education for his ambitious project, shuttling between continents like an obsessive commuter. Back home in Austin, a series of fundraising events kicked off with the March 2009 premiere of *One Peace at a Time* at the Paramount Theatre. Pipkin announced his plan to build a high school in Kenya; would anyone out there

## ARTISTS AND FILMMAKERS ANNUAL DINNER HONORS TOMS SHOES AND ONE FOR ONE FOUNDER BLAKE MYCOSKIE

As part of our continuing Year of the Giving Man mission, *ATX Man* is proud to be an official co-sponsor for The Nobevity Project Artists and Filmmakers Dinner 2012 on March 25, at the Four Seasons Austin. The annual gala honors individuals and groups who are making a difference.

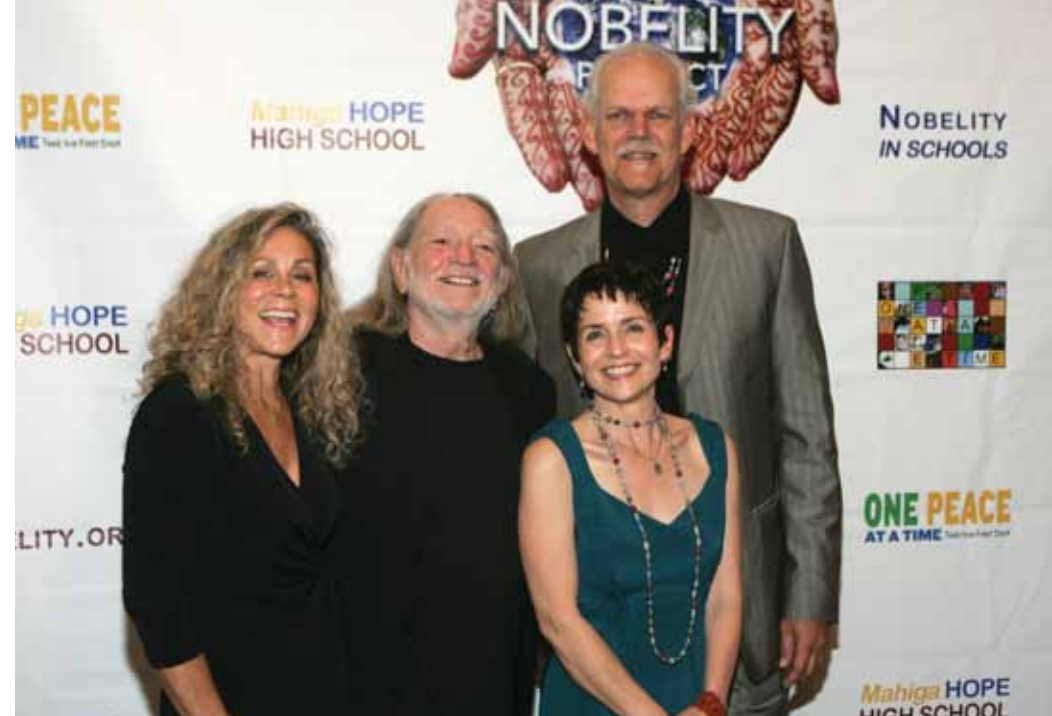
Called “the star-studliest event in Austin” by *Austin American-Statesman* writer Michael Barnes, this year’s edition is destined to be one of the social highlights of the year.

The concept is easy and the payoff is huge: Every dinner guest is seated at a table to share dinner, drinks and conversation with a Texas star. There are 45 tables hosted by 45 legends of Texas film, music and books. Past hosts included Owen Wilson, Willie Nelson, Lyle Lovett, Bill Paxton and many more.

This year’s honoree is designer and global activist Blake Mycoskie, founder of TOMS Shoes and creator of One for One. Mycoskie’s simple but revolutionary spin on the buy-one give-one concept earned him a place on *Fortune Magazine*’s “40 Under 40” list as one of the top businessmen in the world. As of November 2011, TOMS had given more than two million pairs of new shoes to children in need. His latest One for One venture is geared toward sight, with every pair of eyeglasses purchased also providing a pair for those in need. Mycoskie will receive the annual Feed the Peace Award, established by Willie Nelson in 2010.

The evening includes performances from comic Henry Cho, New York City’s DJ Spooky with the Tosca String Quartet, an all-star jam with Shawn Colvin, Joe Ely and more, including the inevitable surprise guests. Where else can you ask a Nobel laureate to pass you the hors d’oeuvres?

For more information, visit nobevity.org.



▲ [From left] Annie and Willie Nelson, and Christy and Turk Pipkin at the Nobevity Dinner.

care to help make it happen? He began with small steps, passing the hat just like the old days, and roping in old friends. Early campaigns included a modest but successful book drive, and a *Thousand Voices for Hope* video and fundraiser

with such artists as Lyle Lovett and the Court Yard Hounds joining choirmaster Willie Nelson. The litany of Mahiga-inspired projects began expanding like an Old Testament laundry list: Books begat a library to house them in. The library begat a computer lab, which begat the computers to fill it. Improved facilities begat more students, which begat more classes.

“The process was just natural,” Pipkin reflects. “One step after another, it just builds. You plant a tree, you build a water system and you build a school.”

When Pipkin first visited St. Joseph’s Mahiga Primary School in 2005, it had nine students, collapsing mud walls and no sanitary facilities. With the help of his multitude of partners, by the time the newly christened Mahiga Hope High School officially opened in October 2010, the renovated structure boasted concrete floors, handcrafted stone walls, running electricity, clean kitchen facilities, fresh water distribution, a fully functional basketball court-cum-rainwater-collection system, a computer lab and a library. As of the start of 2012, the campus encompassed 14 classes, from pre-school to 12th grade, with more than 600 students and growing. Through the Kenya Schools Project and other partners, The Nobevity Project is currently assisting with 12 schools building water systems throughout the world. Here in Austin, Pipkin continues his outreach efforts.

“Every program we have in Kenya has a counter program here. A library program there, a library

program here; tree-planting program there, tree-planting program here,” he says.

Turk Pipkin is the Johnny Appleseed of global grassroots activism.

During the last seven years, Pipkin has spearheaded an ad hoc army of volunteers, architects, artists and engineers backed by a network of Mensa-bred advisors who would make any world government envious. But instead of building munitions, he builds schools. Instead of digging for oil, he provides water to impoverished rural communities. Instead of handouts, he offers self-sustainability.

It’s not all utopian bread and roses. For every victory, obstacles arise with discouraging regularity. Floods wash out roadways, budgets are gouged and government bureaucrats can impede progress.

“Everybody gets discouraged sometimes,” Pipkin acknowledges. “The trick is not to dwell on it. Otherwise, at a certain point, it leads to something. It’s not called discouragement, it’s called depression.”

As both spouse and partner in The Nobevity Project, Christy Pipkin has experienced firsthand the fluctuating emotional repercussions of personal commitment.

“It’s a little like having children,” she says. “Actually, it’s a lot like having children, with all the highs and lows. Sometimes I think it looks romantic from the outside—and in a way I suppose it is—but it is also a lot of work. There are times we have to forcibly stop working, turn on a movie, take a walk and just not talk to each other. Luckily, he travels a lot.”

As an artist and filmmaker actively involved in social causes that invariably bump heads with politics, Pipkin is sometimes exposed to carping from critics who don’t think celebrities should dabble in world affairs.

“I’m not that much of a celebrity, so I don’t get that much heat,” he says. “Even if I did, it shouldn’t really

matter. I’m dealing with education now, primarily. It’s pretty ludicrous to think that kids can make a difference in the adult world if they don’t get a high-school education. The generations coming up are the ones who are going to have to change it, become the workforce and deal intelligently with problems.

“A lot of people take the viewpoint that it’s not our government’s job to be responsible at all for education in Africa. But it’s a matter of enlightened self-interest. Would our money be better spent as a government supporting education efforts in Africa than loaning money to governments to buy weapons that they’ll never pay back once they have them, which is what we’ve been doing for the last 40 years? Why not just spend the money on education and see what happens?”

What’s next in the ongoing odyssey of Turk Pipkin?

“I don’t know,” he shrugs. “I think about where I’ll be in 10 minutes.”

As of this writing, he’s in the midst of filming his latest project, a film he vaguely describes as being “about the reality of good.” And his 1999 novella, *When Angels Sing*, has been made in to a feature film with Kris Kristofferson, Willie Nelson and Harry Connick, Jr., to be released this fall.

Meanwhile, The Nobevity Project and its related activities continue apace, partnering with such organizations as CARE, A Glimmer of Hope, Architecture for Humanity and more. Mahiga Hope High’s first senior class graduates in November. The dream that began with one empty classroom and nine kids has mushroomed in to 12 schools and growing.

The cause-and-effect cycle Turk Pipkin first set in to motion by planting a single tree is now self-perpetuating, endlessly expanding and reverberating on a global level. Looking back, Pipkin connects the dots.

“Christy’s cancer and my kids and 9/11 were three linked events that really were a wake-up call to me about how I wanted to spend my life,” he says. “We need to periodically ask ourselves, ‘Am I doing the thing I want to do with my life? Why was I put here on this earth?’ And if there’s anything we’ve learned, I think those are our core questions.”

It’s enough to make you believe *Building Hope* and *One Peace at a Time* are more than just movie titles and marketing tools; they’re viable lifestyles, choices and solutions. And who knows? The young West Texas boy who began his journey studying Nobel Prize laureates may even receive one himself someday. This world is full of possibilities. And that’s what Turk Pipkin is all about these days: one possibility at a time.

“He’s as much as he can be in one life cycle, a gift,” says old partner Anderson. “He’s friend to the best of us, from the least powerful to the mighty. Imagine how he would have turned out if he hadn’t met me?”

To learn more about the Mahiga Hope High School and The Nobevity Project, visit nobevity.org.

Above photo by Gary Miller.