



MUTUAL AID SOCIETY:
Elissa Montanti and
Kenan Malkic. Above:
Malkic at age 14.

[FIELD GUIDE TO THE DO-GOODER]

Earth Angels

Extreme altruists reap joy from sacrifice. Do they tap into something within all of us? **By Carlin Flora**

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LISSA MONTANTI, A 54-year-old former lab assistant from Staten Island, has personally salvaged the lives of 70 children around the world. Thanks to Montanti's intervention, the children, each one severely injured in a war or natural disaster, received comprehensive medical care in the U.S.

Montanti's odyssey started in 1993, when she happened to meet Bosnia's ambassador to the U.N. The ambassador showed her a letter from an 11-year-old boy named Kenan Malkic, who had recently lost a leg and both of his arms when he chased a soccer ball onto a land mine. "My life



changed in that moment," Montanti says. "Everything faded around me and I almost heard Kenan's voice as I read his letter." She got on the phone and started recruit-

ing hospitals, airlines, and embassies to donate funds and services for Kenan to come to the U.S. for surgeries and prosthetic limbs. Once the arrangements were made, Montanti, who was living paycheck-to-paycheck and couldn't find Bosnia on the map when she began her quest, bought a daybed so Kenan could recover at home with her.

"What Elissa does is so selfless, but she's also very normal," says Malkic, now a 25-year-old computer science student at the College of Staten Island—and a vital force in Montanti's charity, the Global Medical Relief Fund (globmed.org). "I was facing a grim future. She completely changed my life."

Humans have a rare tendency among the world's creatures to give to those to whom they are not genetically related. And some people are particularly prone to benevolence—though as saintly as these extreme altruists seem, they insist they are not special. Even when the sacrifice is so great that they risk their very lives, they believe the rewards of giving far outweigh its consequences.

The Phoenix Effect

"THE ALTRUISTIC TENDENCY is innate in almost everyone," says Stephen Post, a professor of bioethics and family medicine in the School of Medicine at Case Western Reserve University, and author, with Jill Neimark, of *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*. "In general, it is secure attachment in early childhood that allows us to naturally act out of compassion, love, and altruism."

The altruistically challenged among us can be easy to spot. Jim Rilling, a professor of anthropology and psychology at Emory University, found that study participants with especially low levels of

guilt and empathy were less cooperative when playing games in the lab with others. "Most people have an emotional bias to want to cooperate," Rilling says. To hurt another for one's own gain, then, actually takes cognitive effort. Conversely, for those with glimmers of psychopathy, the decision to cooperate is more mentally strenuous.

Surveys of standout altruists indicate common characteristics as well, says Post.

as she cared for her mother, who battled lymphoma for 11 years before passing away. "It was horrible," Montanti says. "Her suffering made me see that life is precious."

Euphoric Rewards

AFTER THE DEATH of her mother, and then, shortly thereafter, her grandmother, Montanti began having debilitating panic attacks. It wasn't until Malkic moved in with her to begin treatment four

teen are healthier than those who don't, even 60 years later, and generous actions are associated with less mortality and depression, even if you start late in life.

Martyrdom and Sacrifice

THERE ARE, OF COURSE, pitfalls. Extreme altruists risk feeding unhealthy psychological compulsions, such as a desire for martyrdom. "The overwhelming caveat on the notion that generosity contributes to health and happiness," says Post, "is that the effects don't hold if the person is overwhelmed. Psychiatrists have distinguished generosity from forms of giving that mask a self-destructive quality. Nobody should let themselves be a doormat."

Real-estate developer Zell Kravinsky famously gave away much of his fortune—and then donated a kidney to a stranger, against his family's wishes, in the belief that others' well-being shouldn't come after his family's. "I'm the last person to want to criticize the man," says Post of Kravinsky. "But he is hyper-altruistic. We have responsibilities to the care of the self, and to our nearest and dearest."

"I never could have done this if I had my own children," says Montanti. "Maybe that's why I didn't have them. But I will never regret any of it. Kenan's letter fell into my lap, and I was made to do this."

"What Elissa does is so selfless, but she's also very normal."

"They don't view themselves as being more giving than anyone else. They are wonderful networkers and leaders, and they have a strong sense of purpose." Europeans who went out of their way to help Jews during the Holocaust tended to come from warm, empathetic families. And caring children likely have parents who set limits, without being authoritarian.

Like Montanti, good Samaritans often have a transformative experience with a needy person they previously believed to be different from them. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by anger and sorrow, they derive energy from these emotions. "There is a kind of 'phoenix effect' of people rising from the ashes of disappointment and hurt and, in resiliency, deciding to do immense good for others," says Post.

"*People* magazine called me the 'Saint of Staten Island,' which was nice of them, but I'm not a saint," says Montanti. "Doing something everyone should do shouldn't make me a saint." Montanti says she has incredible patience, important for cutting through medical and legal red tape. But she doesn't claim to be particularly sharp: "If I were a logical person, I never would have accomplished this. It wouldn't have seemed plausible to me."

Her nurturing side was put to the test

years later that her anxiety finally began to die down. "One night Kenan woke up screaming, and saying, 'I'm going to die, I'm going to die!'" Montanti recalls. "As I was holding him, I felt such a connection. As we put Kenan's pieces back together, he healed my own shattered self."

Many especially self-sacrificing people, says Post, "have done so in a state of euphoria." A mountain of research confirms the psychological and physical benefits of giving back: Teens who volun-

HOW TO LEND A HAND

Even if you're not in the habit of helping others, you can improve your mood and your health by acting altruistically.

■ **START IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD:** You don't have to fly to Africa and work at an AIDS clinic to be altruistic, says Stephen Post. Simply being more caring and more helpful to your family members and friends will strengthen your giving muscles and make you feel great.

■ **EXPERIMENT WITH WAYS OF GIVING:** Sending a check to a charity or volunteering at a local organization are obvious ways to be angelic. But listening carefully, forgiving those who have hurt you, and even going out of your way to make a suffering person laugh are also acts of altruism. Give in a way that suits your personality and it won't feel like work.

■ **USE THE POWER OF INTENTION:** Each morning, Post does a 15-minute visualization exercise, where he pictures himself acting generously and compassionately with his wife, kids, coworkers, and anyone else he plans to see. It's much easier to tap into your better self if you've already imagined it.