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INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS HIS TRUE CALLING

FOR WINNIPEG BUSINESSMAN ART DEFEHR, MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE IS THE BOTTOM LINE

Palliser Furniture CEO Art DeFehr has spent the last several decades providing help in global hot spots

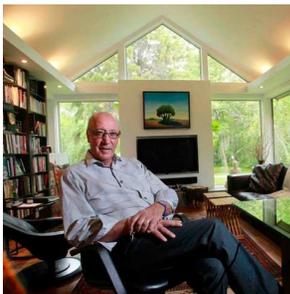
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It's not likely Art DeFehr will cause the Canadian government to change its policy on Iran, but that doesn't stop the 71-year-old Winnipeg businessman from trying.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Art DeFehr (WAYNE GLOWACKI / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS)

His effort has included a detailed, 12-page report called *Iran in Transition*, which followed an intense 10-day tour of the country in April. Then there was a personal conversation with Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird and a meeting with senior ministry officials in Ottawa.

How is it DeFehr, the CEO of Palliser Furniture, would come to even have a position on Iran?

For the same reason he has substantial and first-hand insightful takes on places as far-flung as Russia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Somalia, Mexico, Burma and a number of other international hot spots, not to mention some of the most vexing domestic issues of the day.

It's what he does.

Why he does it is not easy for DeFehr — who believes himself to be of superior analytic skills — to answer.

He's not some well-meaning, good-hearted soul who volunteers for charitable missions in war-torn crisis spots.

"I'm not a missionary with a passion to do that," he said during a couple of extensive discussions about his remarkable career outside business.

His connection with the Mennonite church is a factor, but definitely not the whole story.

He's got some independence — financial and otherwise — as the CEO of Palliser, but it's not as if he's the wealthiest person in town.

After all, Palliser was hit hard in the last recession, and company profits were non-existent for several years. At its peak, Palliser was probably hitting \$500 million in sales and had more than 3,000 employees. These days, the employee count is about half that, but the company has been on a growth curve, with revenue up 40 per cent in the last few years.

There's no question his late mother, the former Mia Reimer, was a major influence. Books have been written about her daring escape from the Soviet Union as a young woman in the 1930s. She made her way through China and on to the United States, where she eventually told her story in public gatherings. (Those talks may have got her onto the McCarthy-era blacklist.)

"I've grown up in a certain setting with stories of people... everyone from my family was a refugee," DeFehr said. "You're highly aware of how challenging the world is for people and how fortunate people like myself are. Certainly my Christian faith with a Mennonite flavour is part of that — it shapes it.

"Another thing is opportunity," he said. "For whatever reason, the opportunities have come my way."

But like all opportunities, you have to be ready, if not out there looking for them.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Martin Luther King, Jr. and supporters of the civil rights movements march through Alabama in March 1965. Art DeFehr was among those who marched. (THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILES)

Originally, DeFehr had decided to go into a career in the Foreign Service after completing a degree at the University of Manitoba. He had a job lined up with the Canadian government in the diplomatic service but chose to spend a year at a Mennonite liberal arts college in Indiana first.

That was in the mid-1960s, the height of the civil rights movement, and DeFehr threw himself into the thick of things. He was part of the Selma to Montgomery march that followed the infamous Bloody Sunday. He befriended Millard Fuller 10 years before he created Habitat for Humanity (the first Habitat Re-Store in the world was in a former Palliser warehouse) and toured the racially segregated south.

That put him on the FBI's radar, and he soon found out he no longer had a job waiting for him with the Canadian government.

He turned to business, where his father already had a thriving furniture company on the go, and went to Harvard, where he earned an MBA.

"I decided I would go into a career where the FBI would not be my HR manager," he said, "It still lives with me... when the Nexus card came out, my wife got one, but I was turned down twice."



[Enlarge Image](#)

Art DeFehr, working for the United Nations, visits a refugee camp in Somalia in the early 1980s. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

Getting shut out of the world of diplomacy might have been a blessing in disguise, because it allowed DeFehr to embark on a personal, ad hoc career in international affairs.

It's still far from over, but it would be hard to find anyone who could match his combination of mainstream business leadership and his significant engagement over the years in a dizzying number of some of the world's most difficult humanitarian and refugee scenarios.

At least once, he was encouraged to leave on the advice of more circumspect advisers who worried for his safety.

DeFehr says he's never been in life-threatening situations, but backed off of some close relationships with post-Soviet Kremlin officials in the early 1990s "when they started killing each other."

"Danger is a relative term," he mused recently. "I have been in some tough places, but I've never been captured or threatened. I have been in some places that some people would say was not wise

to go.

"I have had guns pointed at me a number of times at checkpoints in the middle of the night by drunken soldiers. That is where the danger is. But I am highly aware of my surroundings, and I always have an alternate strategy."

DeFehr is as comfortable rubbing shoulders with the rich and powerful — earlier this year he had dinner in The Hague with the brother of the king of the Netherlands — as he is with the most desperate of refugees.

The mind boggles when you start listing the stuff this guy has done:

In the aftermath of the bloody Bangladesh civil war in the early 1970s that left three million dead, he led a massive agricultural-redevelopment project there as director for the Mennonite Central Committee for two years.

He was one of the leaders and initiators behind what's called the Land Bridge, a program that allowed for the return of more than a million Cambodian refugees to their villages in the late 1970s.

He took a senior United Nations position in Somalia (one senior, career UN officials were hesitant to take because of the apparent futility of the mission) in the early 1980s when warlords first took over the famine-ravaged country.

He started a university in Lithuania in the dying days of the former Soviet Union.

Just last year, he helped organize, host and fund a conflict-resolution conference in Myanmar as an important prelude to democratic elections there in 2015.

"Art DeFehr is a phenomenal guy," said Murray Taylor, the CEO of IGM Financial and a co-conspirator with DeFehr on the Myanmar conference.



[Enlarge Image](#)

DeFehr, in Cambodia for the Land Bridge

"He has basically gone into places on an ad hoc basis, lived and served and helped people become industrious after they have come out of civil war and actual war. His ability to jump into circumstances of concern around the world... is outstanding."

DeFehr is an inveterate world traveller. He admits his financial independence lets him travel and keeps him on the radar of a wide network of international-development contacts.

He's visited 129 countries and counting. Between last fall and early spring, DeFehr was in Myanmar, Kosovo, Iran and North Korea. He has been back and forth to Europe five times since then, including delivering an address about Manitoba's immigration policy at The Club of The Hague, a refugee and migration think-tank.

program, tries out local rice-threshing technology. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)



[Enlarge Image](#)

DeFehr (in white hat) next to rice seeds ready to be distributed in Cambodia in the late 1970s. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)



[Enlarge Image](#)

DeFehr is greeted with flowers while visiting a refugee camp in Bangladesh. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

applications. In those situations, that is how the world works. You do it now. Two years from now, the problem is solved or you're back to war."

Peters said, "Referring to him as one of a kind is close to the truth. I'm not sure I know of anybody who has the combination of skills and interests that Art has. He is very active in the business world. But... I suspect his mind and passion is perhaps more in development than it is in business."

DeFehr is more candid than most CEOs. Having a family-owned business helps. But the way DeFehr frames the work he does outside of business is bordering on C-suite blasphemy.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Art DeFehr (right) tours an agricultural program in Bangladesh in the 1970s. The CEO has been visiting some of the world's most troubled places for decades. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

"I have some natural inclination about how to get into these things, to recognize them and do something with them," he said. "I don't do them because I want acclaim. It is just what I do."

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[Enlarge Image](#)

DeFehr speaking at Lithuanian Christian College. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

He travelled to Kosovo so he could try to understand the Balkan War.

"I was supposed to travel there during the crisis, but I was diagnosed with cancer the week before we were to leave. (His cancer is in remission.) I never really understood that war."

His wife, Leona, has accompanied DeFehr on his forays for many years, although she passed on North Korea this year.

He stays closer to home when business requires, has played a leading role in the business community's support of the Provincial Nominee Program, and has had a strong board role in the creation of Canadian Mennonite University. He has, in fact, donated a significant amount of money to the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

"Art has an incredible appetite for world travel," said Jim Carr, former CEO of the Business Council of Manitoba, which DeFehr helped found.

"He just loves the atmosphere of these places and the energy from its people, the dynamism of cultures, the intrigue of different political systems. He stretches the boundaries of his comfort zone in order to experience places that others don't or won't."

While he has aligned himself with organizations over the years, DeFehr operates on his own schedule and agenda. But Don Peters, the executive director of the Mennonite Central Committee, said it wouldn't be right to call him a "free agent."

"It's important for him to connect with others doing similar work," Peters said. "His level of connectivity is with all kinds of people. I think that he would be hamstrung if he was only connected to one organization or another. Art is able to make some things happen. Whereas if he is going to go through one of the agencies, there is going to be some protocol."

From 1989 into the early '90s, DeFehr made about a dozen trips into the former Soviet republics and eventually held a number of conferences on business ethics, among other things.

"I had money strapped to my leg... about \$30,000 to \$40,000 on my body," he said matter-of-factly. "If you do something, you pay cash. You do it now, not six months from now, no grant

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"I enjoy business, and I do it reasonably well," he said. "But I'm not in business to make money. Business buys me independence, and it buys me access. The reason I maintain my title as CEO — I'm spending 10 to 20 per cent of my time on the business — is that retired guys with money are a dime a dozen, and no one calls them except for donations."

In a birthday lampoon prepared by some friends for his 50th birthday in 1992, they quoted his application to Harvard Business School in the late '60s. In answer to the questions about his greatest strength and weakness, DeFehr boldly stated, "My greatest strength is self-confidence." To the question of his greatest weakness, Art humbly stated, "My greatest weakness is my self-confidence."

Even if it is true — as some of his longtime colleagues can't help but point out — that he has a larger-than-life ego, it is probably just as true that he deserves more acclaim than he's received considering the incredible accomplishments and impact he's had around the world.

"I have some natural inclination about how to get into these things, to recognize them and do something with them," he said. "I don't do them because I want acclaim. It is just what I do."

Providing help in global hot spots

Lithuanian Christian College

The main academic/administration building on the campus of the English-language LCC (Lithuanian Christian College) International University in Klaipeda, Lithuania, on the shores of the Baltic Sea, is called the DeFehr Centre.

It's named after the school's founder.

Starting an independent post-secondary institution in 1990, before the Soviet Union disintegrated, is one of Art DeFehr's more unlikely, and enduring, accomplishments.

More than 20 years later, it is fully accredited and has 600 students from various countries, with a number of PhDs on staff.

When the recent sabre-rattling started in eastern Ukraine and the ethnic divisions between Ukrainians and pro-Russian rebels boiled over into violence, Russian and Ukrainian students were sharing dorm rooms at LCC.

"It (the former Soviet Union in the late '80s and early '90s) was a pretty tough place to operate in," DeFehr said. "The Soviet universities

didn't want the competition; neither did the Catholics. There were six or seven years (of difficulties). But I am the kind of guy that if you want to push, I'll push back."

He backstopped much of the funding for the first few years of the school's existence and developed a formula where instructors provided their time for free.

"We don't use the word volunteer (we provide housing and airfare). We call it a collaborative funding model," said Marlene Wall, the president of LCC, in an interview this summer while she was on vacation in Mexico.

"It's part of the mind-blowing uniqueness at LCC," she said. "It's not there for people who just want a job or (to) move forward in their career path. It's for people who truly understand the mission of the school."

That mission is about the development of civil society that was missing — and is still missing — in large part during the Soviet era.

"We are a school that believes in leadership development in an environment of a country struggling to regain its identity," said Wall, who grew up in Winnipeg as a child and earned her PhD in the U.S. "It's grounded in the idea of a free-market economy without corruption."

While DeFehr's foundation still contributes, the school is in good financial shape and would not go away if he stopped giving.

"Art is always a step ahead," Wall said. "He usually has a strategy in mind that we only catch up to in a year or more. Then we realize Art said this some time ago."

Said DeFehr: "There were about 100 of these private schools that started, but most of them did not make it. This is the best of them."



[Enlarge Image](#)

DeFehr in Bangladesh, using a new type of pump developed by Mennonite Central Committee (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

Bangladesh

Bangladesh in the early 1970s was Art DeFehr's first significant time abroad.

"It was a pretty awful scene," he recently recalled. "It was more of a genocide than Rwanda, with about three million dead in nine months. But I found I could work almost immediately on the national stage there."

It was the Mennonite Central Committee that put the call to DeFehr, a recent Harvard graduate known to the relief agency. MCC had raised more than \$1 million, and they needed someone with the management skills to administer a large-scale agricultural rehabilitation program.

"I was able to think of things no one had thought of before," DeFehr said. "I would organize things, and then many of the other agencies would form a line under the umbrella. But I would tend to originate things. I was organizing everyone else."

He got the international-development bug in Bangladesh. It is also where he and his wife, Leona, adopted their two daughters. They spent two years there.

"The civil rights movement created my political radicalization," he said. "I always tell people to go to the toughest place, because that is where you will learn the most. The people who do well come from the toughest places. It's a test of fire."



[Enlarge Image](#)

DeFehr at the Cambodia border (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

Cambodia

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, DeFehr was invited to study the international refugee crisis characterized by the boat people. This visit to the region led to an invitation to become involved in the equally serious refugee problem on the border between Thailand and Cambodia.

In the late 1970s, there were nearly a million starving Cambodians fleeing the vicious Khmer Rouge regime. They ended up in refugee camps where the borders of Cambodia and Thailand meet.

Because of various bureaucratic issues regarding jurisdiction, the people would be fed in the refugee camps, but they would not be able to return to their villages.

"They had no tools and no seed. They could go back home, but they would starve," DeFehr said.

He helped devise a program where rice seed and tools were distributed to hundreds of thousands of Cambodian villagers, allowing them to return to their homes. It is referred to as the Land Bridge.

"Probably the most significant thing I did was in Cambodia," he said.

Myanmar

As committed as he is to his Mennonite faith, DeFehr's interests in international affairs could be said to be Catholic, and he lets himself be influenced by some amazing characters he meets.

In April, he and his wife, Leona, helped host and sponsor a seminar and workshop on conflict resolution and peace-building in Yangon, Myanmar (once known as Rangoon, Burma).

The five-day event was attended by senior leaders from more than a dozen ethnic groups in Myanmar who have been at odds (if not war) with each other for decades. It was heavily covered by the local media and featured presentations by conflict-resolution experts from Menno Simons College in Winnipeg.

Myanmar was not necessarily on DeFehr's radar until he agreed to attend a fundraiser organized by IGM Financial CEO Murray Taylor and his wife, Charlotte. They were raising money to assist in Taylor's church's efforts to send some Winnipeggers to Myanmar refugee camps to provide eye care.

A very smart Myanmar immigrant named Zaceu Lian was DeFehr's waiter at the fundraiser, and he spoke to DeFehr.

"A young guy approached me," DeFehr said. "He had ideas about going back when the generals started opening up the country and some of the exiles were going back. He had an idea. After 60 years of fighting, he said, 'We know how to fight — we do not know how to talk or

how to negotiate.' That is a different skill."

Getting people with no history of doing so to listen and talk to each other is a theme that runs through a lot of DeFehr's work.

It also is an example of his willingness to go it alone, officialdom be damned.

"He (Lian) was going to go to government (for some assistance), but the Canadian government is not into peacemaking these days. By the time they fund you, either the war is back on or the opportunity is passed and it is too late. These are the things you do quickly or not at all."

Taylor had been involved in helping many Burmese immigrants settle in Winnipeg for many years but was never engaged in the political details. The idea of organizing an event took flight, and it was determined it would take about \$70,000 to pull it off.

"We told Art, 'We love the Burmese people, and we're in if you are,' " said Taylor.

"I do stuff like this," DeFehr said. "I'm willing to place a bet on a young man like this. These are the kinds of things, if done at the right time, they really mean something."

After a few calls, five other prominent Winnipeg business leaders all put in \$10,000. "Art and Leona went, which was quite amazing," Taylor said. "His fascination with people who are in distress, his ability to come and help people figure out solutions, and his interest in travelling to places that people would never even dream of is outstanding."



[Enlarge Image](#)

DeFehr visiting an irrigation settlement project in Somalia. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

Somalia

In 1983, DeFehr, with his family's endorsement, chose to take a hardship assignment with the United Nations in Somalia rather than accept a position as president of a small California college.

"At the time, one of my daughters said we could go to California any time," DeFehr remembers.

In accepting the job, DeFehr became a high-ranking United Nations official for the one year he lasted in Somalia, something that is still rare in the UN bureaucracy. (The unwritten understanding of his employment with the UN was he would agree to resign the position when the mission was over.)

It was after his work in Bangladesh, which had caught the eye of many in the international refugee community.

"I had a reputation," said DeFehr, as if he was referring to his ability to deliver quality furniture on time at the agreed-upon price.

Those were the beginnings of the failed state Somalia was to become. DeFehr was trying to deal with massive corruption and quickly became a threat to many people whose vested interests he was challenging.

François Fouinat, the Geneva-based senior adviser to the special representative of the secretary general for migration and development and a former senior official with the UN High Commission for Refugees, worked with DeFehr in Somalia.

"Art's landing in Somalia was a shock, as he was not one of us and came parachuted, from his Manitoba business, to handle one of the most complicated refugee situations of that time in Africa," Fouinat said in an email exchange.

Al Doerksen, a longtime colleague in international-development efforts and a former vice-president at Palliser, said: "He is a quick study, but he probably underestimated how deeply entrenched some of the interests were. He kind of became persona non grata very quickly; he was ruffling so many feathers, stepping on so many toes."

DeFehr was forced to leave when his safety was in doubt.

"I was in too much danger," he said. "I had gored too many oxen at that time."

After Somalia, he travelled farther in Africa and witnessed the beginnings of the terrible Ethiopian famine before it became an international issue.

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History

Updated on Wednesday, August 20, 2014 at 10:53 AM CDT: Clarifies donations to the CMHR.

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