

John and Elizabeth Phillips Award 2019

**D. Michael Shafer '71 —**

Michael, you have spent a lifetime doing what others consider acts of kindness and sacrifice but to you are simply the recognition of our shared humanity.

Whether as a university professor, foster parent, environmental entrepreneur or grassroots community organizer, you have remained consistent in your clarity of purpose: improving the lives of others. Friends say that you have never turned your back on those in need.

This moral imperative was instilled in you early by your father, a chemistry professor who said little but set a strong example. He taught you to lead from the front and to do the right thing, no matter what. These were hard rules in your New Hampshire home, never articulated but clear as a bell.

In 1968, you arrived at the Academy a small-town boy wearing your father's sports coat cut down to fit — the leather patches running from your wrists to your elbows. You still remember his words as he dropped you off for preseason football that first year as a lower: "Your measure as a man," he said, "will be how much better the world is when you leave it than when you entered it."

Taking this sage counsel to heart, you set your sights on the wider world. You slept with vocabulary flashcards under your pillow for months to earn acceptance into Exeter's "Schoolboys Abroad" program. You say this first international excursion to France "remade" you, and you never looked back. The next summer you walked the length of Yugoslavia with your brother.

During your undergraduate years at Yale, you took 15 months off to travel Africa. In Ethiopia, you befriended the leaders of an insurgency and witnessed firsthand how they mobilized laborers to rise up against one of the most powerful war machines in the world with nothing but wooden pitchforks. It was an experience that became the touchstone of your professional career. It taught you about authority, legitimacy, citizenship, belonging and the strength of individuals to enact change — lessons that continue to inspire your work today.

A post at the State Department in Washington, D.C., and a consulting position at the Agency of International Development helped you realize that you weren't interested in playing politics at the governmental level. You headed to Tunisia to learn Arabic and applied to graduate school for political science, ultimately earning your doctorate from Harvard in 1984.

Eager to share what you had learned, you accepted a teaching position at Rutgers University and remained there for nearly 25 years. Your former students say you were a charismatic and demanding professor, an empathetic listener. You won teaching awards every year.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton launched the Citizenship and Service Education, or CASE, a program to address the collapse of citizenship among young Americans. The program was aligned with your ideals: You felt strongly that students learn to be good citizens through action, and that university students constituted a huge, latent resource of talent. You took the helm of the CASE program and, within a few years, you were matching 1,000 students per semester with more than 300 community organizations. Under your leadership, CASE became one of the largest service-learning programs in the United States.

Your personal commitment to the developing world inspired you to expand CASE beyond America's borders to newly democratized countries like Poland, Moldova, Ethiopia, South Africa and Lebanon; and to found Global PACT, or Global Partnerships for Activism and Cross-Cultural Training. Global PACT has trained students from more than 50 countries to run programs in civic engagement, anti-poverty, anti-trafficking and post-apartheid conflict resolution.

At 55, after achieving the stability of tenure and raising four adopted children, including two with special needs, as well as 21 foster children, you decided to put theory into practice and pivoted from scholar to social entrepreneur. The move was an easy choice, you say. "I wanted to take on the big issues of the day, not as an expert, not from Geneva or Paris or Washington, but from the weeds. I wanted to build quality of life from the bottom up."

In 2008, you and your wife, Evelind Schecter, sold or gave away most of your possessions and flew to the mountainous, rural village of Phrao, Thailand, to found Warm Heart, a grassroots community development organization serving one of the country's poorest districts. Through Warm Heart, you provide safe housing, education and health services for 40 at-risk children, the disabled and the elderly. But your work in Thailand extends beyond these individuals and their families. Mindful of the planet and its future, you developed a low-tech, low-cost biochar machine that converts biomass into fertilizer. By teaching local farmers to build and use these machines, you not only help them improve their crop yields and income, but positively impact the environment through climate change mitigation.

Michael, for inspiring people to believe in themselves and take collective action for good; for bringing light into the lives of the abandoned and disenfranchised all around the globe; and for living up to your father's measure and making the world a better place, we honor you with the 2019 John and Elizabeth Phillips Award.