

# WATER COOLER

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## Local ad agency scrambled when national charity called

**D**oug Burford has played the ad game for more than three decades, but he can still move fast when opportunity calls — especially if it involves a good cause.

It's not every day that a national charity asks a little Richmond agency to pitch its account.

"Out of the blue we get this call: Would we make a presentation?" Burford recalled. "We had two days to

do a demo. I felt like David without a slingshot."

The Smile Train, with headquarters on Fifth Avenue in New York, is dedicated to helping children in underdeveloped countries who are born with cleft lips and palates, a disfigurement that can

threaten their health — and their chance to live a happy life.

The organization teaches doctors and hospitals in those countries how to repair clefts. It provides free equipment and financial aid. Overseas, the life-changing operation can cost as little as \$250. Often, it takes just 45 minutes.

Since 1999, Smile Train has helped more than 156,000 children in 60 countries.

A perfect assignment, in other words, for Burford Co. Advertising.

The downtown agency has made its fortune creating ads for car dealers, furniture stores and hospitals. But it's probably best known for its heart-wrenching spots for Christian Children's Fund, another Richmond outfit.

Burford has built his reputation on humorous, sometimes slightly goofy ads. He's a successful businessman but a bit of a softy, too.

Watching a new set of CCF ads that he shot in some of the worst slums in Brazil late last year, Burford slumps down in his chair. He's a little misty-eyed.

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The Smile Train was ready to test its first TV campaign, which will probably have a national reach. It talked to nine ad agencies, including major-league Manhattan firms.

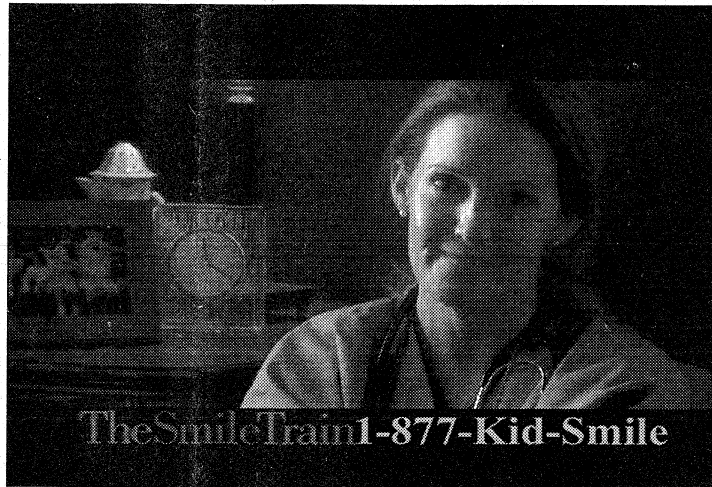
"We didn't think there was a right fit," said Priscilla Ma, the senior marketing manager.

Then she heard about Burford's CCF ads — all highly emotional, direct-marketing appeals. So Ma decided to give the Richmond shop a shot.

When The Smile Train phoned in early January, Burford jumped.

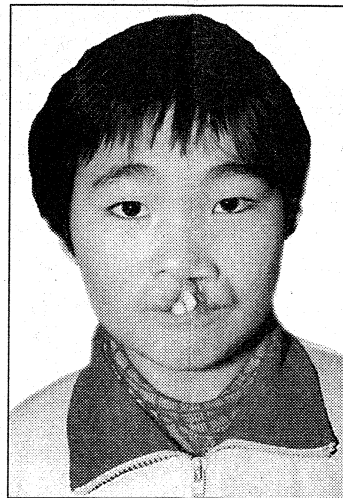
In a day, he wrote a script, set up a production crew, hired an actress and pulled stories and photos from The Smile Train Web site — [www.smiletrain.com](http://www.smiletrain.com).

Then things got complicated.



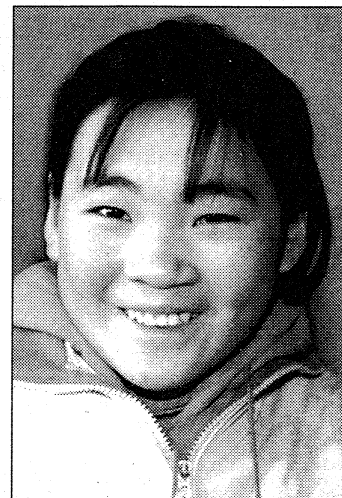
BURFORD CO. ADVERTISING

**Makeup artist Beth Jones read the script in an ad for The Smile Train, a national charity that helps children in underdeveloped countries who are born with cleft lips and palates. Wang Li (shown below before and after surgery) is a child in China who has been helped by The Smile Train.**



"For some reason, the talent couldn't get there on time," Burford said.

Luckily, Beth Jones was in Burford's office. She's a makeup art-



THE SMILE TRAIN

ist.

"I'm sitting there waiting to do makeup and he says: 'Here, read this,'" Jones said. "It was just a 60-second script. "To me, it

seemed like Tolstoy."

But she pulled it off, with some help from a teleprompter.

"If anybody had any idea how this was done, they would have died," Burford said.

He headed to New York with the demo the next day. "I felt like the Beverly Hillbillies on Fifth Avenue. One thing we're not is slick. They could tell that when we walked in."

He made his pitch and showed the spot, with Jones making an earnest, face-to-the-camera appeal for donations. Afterwards, Burford glanced at the president of the charity. "He smiled, looked at us and walked out of the room."

Burford flew home, figuring he'd blown the account. "The next morning, they called and said we were the agency they were looking for."

Ma said The Smile Train needs ads that are "real, genuine and can pull people in emotionally."

She declined to say how much the charity will spend on the campaign but stressed that 100 percent of donations go to medical programs. Start-up grants from the charity's founders pay the marketing and administrative costs.

Burford is working on scripts now. And Jones is hoping for an encore in front of the camera.

"I would love to do another one." That's OK with the adman. He likes her sincerity.

"I get so emotional," Burford says. "But I think they can tell when you care. I know it's corny."

Jones shakes her head. She smiles. "No, it's not corny, Doug."

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**BOB RAYNER**

**Burford**