

SEPTEMBER 17, 2005, 10:44 AM

The Odd Couple: Paul Simon and Dr. Irwin Redlener

Think of it as the perfect marriage of hip and square: [Paul Simon](#), the singer-composer-guitarist who can still rock you into a sweet thundering oblivion (I saw him perform just a few months ago), and Irwin Redlener, the dedicated, cerebral physician who refuses to let go of the thought that good people and hard work can change the world.

They met back in the '80s at a time when homelessness had exploded in New York City and thousands of families, many with small children, were being packed into teeming, fetid welfare hotels. Both Paul and Irwin had been involved in international humanitarian campaigns, but here was a festering problem almost literally on their doorsteps.

“We went on a tour of some of the not-so-hot spots in the city,” Irwin said. “We went to the welfare hotels, to boarder-baby facilities where they had these infants whose mothers were crack cocaine addicts, and we went to some of the infant H.I.V. programs. It was a hell of a day, just one thing after another.”

With a problem that big, how do you make a real impact? Irwin is a pediatrician and it was immediately obvious that the kids in the various shelters were not getting health care. The two men made that their focus.

The kids could not easily get to doctor's offices or clinics, so Paul and Irwin began to brainstorm the idea of a vehicle that would bring the health services to the kids. It was an intriguing thought — a fully-equipped, fully-staffed medical van that would travel the city, bringing essential services to homeless youngsters who normally would get treatment only in emergencies.

The van would be expensive, perhaps as much as \$90,000. Paul said he would pay for it and the project moved forward. An affiliation was established with a local medical center for children who required hospitalization, and a computerized system was devised that allowed detailed medical histories to follow the kids as they moved from residence to another.

The gleaming blue van made its debut in the fall of 1987. “The color was a mistake,” Irwin said. “We had ordered a white van with blue letters. But the van we got was a beautiful blue, so we were really glad about that.”

As Irwin began making his rounds in the van, the enormity of the need became even more apparent. Paul asked, “Do you think we need another one?” and Irwin replied, “Oh yeah.”

A concert featuring Paul, Bruce Springsteen, Billy Joel, James Taylor and others was held at Madison Square Garden to raise money for a second mobile unit. More than two dozen would follow. The project was named the [Children’s Health Fund](#) and it now brings vital health services to children and their families in struggling communities in 13 states and the District of Columbia.

Most recently Paul and Irwin were in Mississippi and Louisiana to guide the fund’s efforts to help kids displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

The best ideas are often the simplest ones. The mobile vans of the Children’s Health Fund was a brilliant idea, brilliantly executed.

(Photo credit: This photo was taken by Jason Green in December 2003 at the Paul Simon Art Garfunkel Reunion Concert at Madison Square Garden.)