

How to Give It: Silvio Ursini

The founder of the Obikà restaurant group and senior executive for Bulgari says luxury brands play a key role in the charity sector

Interview by Mika Ross-Southall JULY 19, 2012

Silvio Ursini, 49, is founder and president of the Italy-based Obikà restaurant group, which has recently opened a branch in south Kensington. He supports Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos International (www.nph.org), a charity that has been caring for children in Latin America and the Caribbean since 1954. Ursini is executive vice president for hotels and resorts at luxury goods company Bulgari and a board member of Save the Children in Italy (www.savethechildren.org.uk).

Which causes do you support, and why?

My focus is on Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos. I recently went to Haiti to visit the mobile bakery project that we are funding, producing up to 5,000 buns a day to feed children. I was most impressed with meeting some of the children that NPH has sheltered and educated over the years. They are now in their 20s and are a bunch of enthusiastic, perfectly educated, multi-lingual people who were abandoned or orphaned 20 years ago. My wife and I also support a small, grassroots organisation in Haiti called Lambi (www.lambifund.org). These organisations have very low overheads, so they're efficient and they work on empowering the local communities to help themselves.

Why did you choose to focus on children's charities?

Children are the backbone of our future society. If you invest in them, not only are you making their lives better now but you have a chance of improving the world in the future because you will have individuals entering society who are educated and better equipped.

How did your childhood affect your views on charity?

I was born and raised in Naples, a city of many facets – some of which are pretty tough. Affluent neighbourhoods were not divided from the slums. So, despite my fortunate background, I would live alongside people from all walks of life. I think this shaped my attitude towards charity.

What would you change about the charitable sector?

The charitable sector should speak out more about the positive effects of its work and celebrate its results and achievements. To fundraise, charities emphasise the problems but I think this ultimately backfires because people become deaf to it. When you're over-exposed you have a tendency to be fatalistic – there's an overwhelming amount of problems happening in the world so why do anything at all? But if you see results and see that things are changing, then people are more motivated to give and keep giving.

What does charity mean to you?

It means sharing my luck and giving people the same kind of opportunities that I've had in life. If you go back to the roots of the word charity, from the Latin *caritas*, it means to love and care for people. It's not a duty or something that comes out of guilt. It comes from the heart and then it is more meaningful.

How can luxury goods and food industries encourage consumers to concentrate on altruism rather than themselves?

Luxury goods industries make beautiful products and restaurants can make great food. Both, in a way, make our lives richer. By consuming these products we indirectly support some remarkable craftsmen and producers who would otherwise be wiped away by mass production. Also, luxury goods in particular, but also restaurants, have high visibility. If you have a huge, secure brand like Bulgari partnering with Save the Children, this charity will be more visible because it is aligned with a popular, glamorous industry. The luxury industries then become a kind of role model.

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