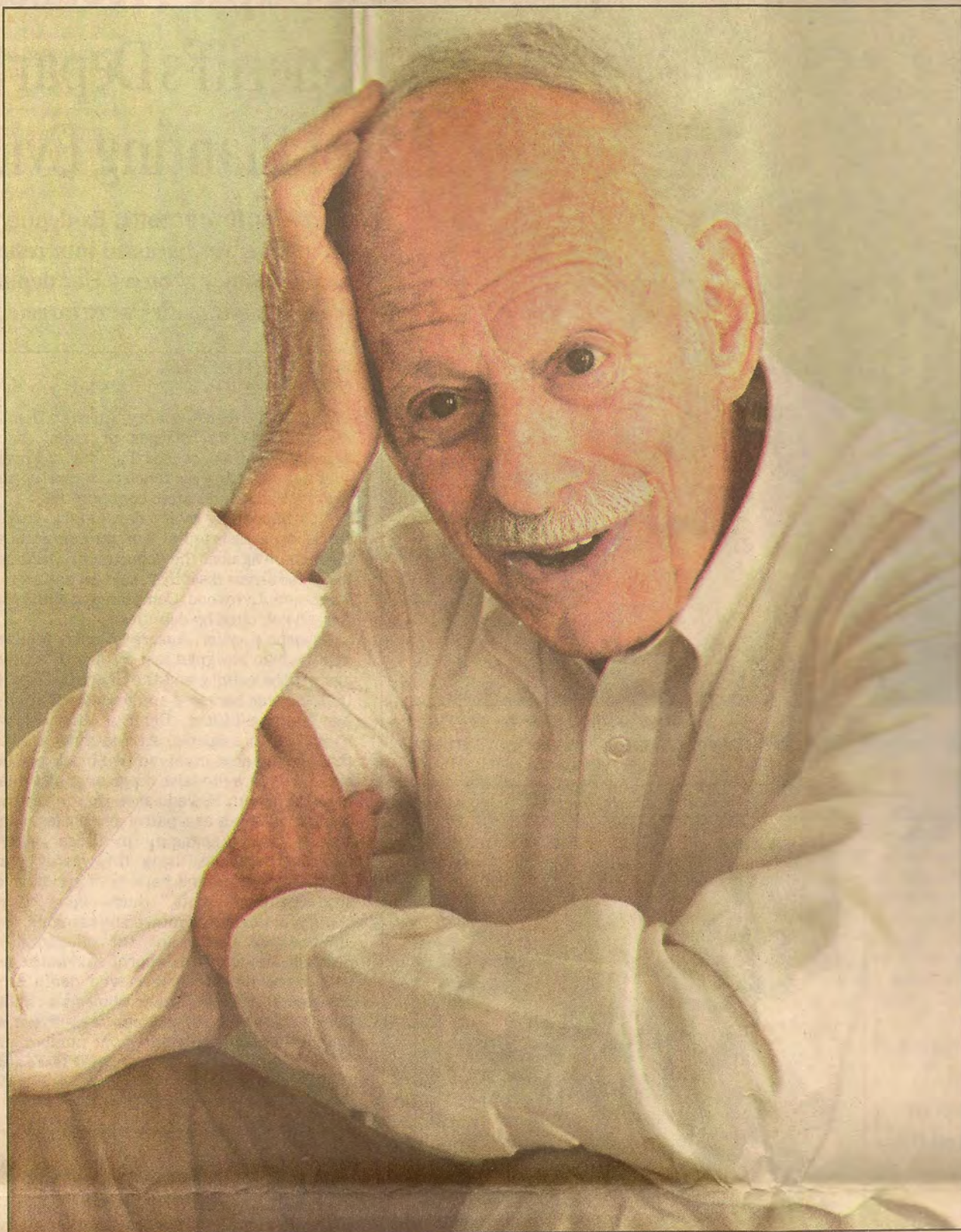


# HEARTS OF THE CITY

Exploring attitudes and issues behind the news.

**The**  
Today's Simon grants who full freedom.



LAWRENCE K. HO / Los Angeles Times

Millionaire Kurt Simon travels the nation seeking recipients for his foundation's \$10,000 to \$20,000 awards.

# Freedom Has Its Rewards

Immigrant who fled Nazis says thank you to America by sharing his wealth with crusaders for personal liberty.

By EMI ENDO  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

**B**rentwood millionaire Kurt Simon has a snap answer when you ask him why he gives his money away: a passion for individual freedom.

The 83-year-old German immigrant and educational film producer awards annual cash grants through his foundation, the Sovereign Fund. Since 1981, Simon and a three-member board of directors have awarded about \$200,000 to honor people he deems crusaders for personal freedom and against government restrictions.

Recipients of the grants, usually \$10,000 to \$20,000, range from the well-known to the unsung.

There was the founder of Mary Kay cosmetics, who to Simon's mind freed workers from "9 to 5 slavery" by giving them the opportunity to set their own schedules.

There was the Texas elementary school teacher who taught students self-reliance by letting them design part of their learning plan. Classes ran a mail-order business and shared in the profits.

And there was former Rep. John Moss of California, who worked 11 years to pass the

Freedom of Information Act, which has made many federal records available to the public.

This year, Simon stepped into controversy when his foundation gave a \$20,000 award to Jack Kevorkian, the retired pathologist who faces murder charges for allegedly violating Michigan's assisted-suicide ban and acknowledges helping two dozen people commit suicide since 1990.

As Simon sees it, Kevorkian is fighting for the basic freedom to choose life or death.

"It isn't up to the bureaucrats to say no" to terminally ill patients who wish to end their lives, Simon said. "Don't the people have any rights anymore?"

Simon, who sports a trim white mustache and speaks with the slightest hint of a German accent, started the foundation when, at 69, he began to consider death imminent. He said he felt an obligation to "pay a debt of gratitude to this country" for the opportunities it has given him.

Simon left Germany in 1936, fearing persecution. Although only part Jewish, "according to Hitler's weird racial laws, I was Jewish. I thought it was wise to leave."

He was 23, poor and spoke what he describes as lousy English when he came to America.

At an employment office in New York, a staff member asked Simon what he wanted to do in America.

"I want to eat," Simon recalls answering.

Pressed to reveal his goals, Simon mentioned one he thought unattainable: to produce motion pictures.

He went on to work as a newspaper photographer, television director and producer, and real estate developer. He also served in the Army.

And, he notes with a satisfied smile, he made many movies, mostly films for schools.

A U.S. citizen since 1941, Simon shows his

love of his adopted country by throwing big Fourth of July parties, said longtime friend Margarita McCoy.

"He reveres the possibility for individual freedom and what that can mean for people," McCoy said. "He has a definite idea of what this country ought to be about and he gets very angry when it disappoints him."

As a builder, Simon said he is frustrated at how long it takes to obtain building permits. Certain requirements cause builders to use excessive wood and concrete, he says.

He abhors waste, both in government and his own life. In his home, he has rigged an old window screen to a stationary bicycle to hold a newspaper so he can exercise as he reads.

Knickknacks don't clutter his spacious living room or white kitchen. Simon said he has donated most of his books to UCLA.

"I don't live extravagantly," he said. "I only have five ties. I have two suits."

Instead, Simon invests money and time in the Sovereign Fund, which doesn't accept donations.

The foundation considers nominations, but Simon enjoys doing his own research on grant recipients. Every year, he says, he and his companion, Atsuko Kawahara, spend two months traveling around the country searching for people who deserve awards.

At each town Simon visits, he talks to community leaders, trying to find people who have made a difference. He meets with potential candidates without letting them know about the foundation or the awards, and hires professional researchers to comb through information about the final pool of candidates.

Although he is in good health, Simon is still convinced he will die soon. "It's time to leave what I have gathered," he said.