



HOWARD'S WAY



The son of one of the world's richest men, Howard Buffett spent 15 months as sheriff in a small, downtrodden American county. The experience turbocharged his campaign to use his billions to tackle the city's drug and policing problems.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPH BY

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LAST YEAR, as London bade farewell to its longest summer, a surprise email popped into my inbox. Signed HGB, it simply asked, "You alive?" No sooner had I replied in the affirmative, then an enthusiastic response pinged back: "I have been sheriff the past year and got my dog certified as a police dog! Learnt more than any time in my life. Changed a lot of things too. Come for a ride-along." Less than a month later I was in Decatur, Illinois, on night patrol with the sheriff of Macon County, Howard Graham Buffett, who also happens to be elder son of Warren Buffett, the third richest man in the world, one worth upwards of \$US80 billion (about \$110 billion).

The city of Decatur – population 72,000 and first adult home to former US president Abraham Lincoln – sits on the Sangamon River roughly three hours south-west of Chicago. Dominated by a man-made lake built in the 1920s, it is an archetypal town of the American Midwest, its waterside suburbs graced with wide, leafy streets, manicured grassy verges and row after row of timber bungalows painted in postcard-pretty gelato colours. For most of the 20th century, this place, nicknamed Soy City, was a thriving blue-collar town, a manufacturing powerhouse that housed plants for corporate giants such as Firestone and Caterpillar, while the vast area that surrounds it processed one-third of the world's soy beans.

Today, evidence of a decades-long decline in heavy industry and the loss of thousands of jobs is visible in the forest of "For Sale" signs that litter its inner suburbs. Family homes have been abandoned or repossessed, their front doors nailed shut, broken windows secured with dusty plastic that has seen more than one winter. Decatur, according to locals, has some of the benefits of a big city but many more of the drawbacks. Among the biggest of these has been the arrival of cheap, easy-to-score heroin and its sinister, synthetic cousin, Fentanyl. In 2017, 72,000 US citizens died from drug overdose, 10 per cent more than the year prior, and more than deaths from guns or road accidents. An estimated 21.5 million Americans were afflicted by some kind of substance abuse

disorder during 2014, while heroin use has doubled in young adults over the past 10 years.

When I visit in late 2018, Howard Buffett, farmer, photographer, billionaire philanthropist, is in the last, frantic weeks of a 15-month appointment as sheriff of his beloved Macon County, where he has lived and farmed with his wife, Devon, and their five children, since 1992. He had already trained and served as an auxiliary deputy and undersheriff, volunteering hundreds of hours over seven years. When the popular sitting sheriff, Tom Schneider, took early retirement, he asked Howard, rather than one of his lieutenants, to finish his term.

"Howard and I are old friends and I knew that he had the skills and would be inclusive ... he was one of the most dedicated sheriff volunteers we have ever had," Schneider says. In the US, county sheriffs are elected to four-year terms and are responsible for law enforcement primarily outside city perimeters, tackling issues ranging from violent crime and drugs to traffic infringements. They also control county jails, run courthouses and serve court documents. The turf inside the urban centres belongs to the city police departments, whose chiefs are professionally appointed.

Not everyone was happy with Howard's appointment, which required approval from the then Democrat-majority Macon County board. Unlike his father, Howard is a proud Republican. It took nearly two months and some deft backroom politicking, but on September 15, 2017, the son of the billionaire investor known as the Oracle of Omaha was officially installed in the sheriff's office. Since then, it's been a whirlwind of energetic reform, instigating new projects and raising money, including using more than \$US60 million of Buffett family money to build state-of-the-art medical facilities for drug addicts and a high-tech academy to train a new generation of police attuned to the specific problems of the community they serve.

TWELVE YEARS have passed since Buffett senior stunned the global financial community by pledging \$US37 billion of his then \$US44-billion fortune to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He also shocked his three

children by giving them \$US1 billion each. Warren's gift had a caveat: the money was theirs only if they could find ways to give it all away to make the world a better place. To celebrate his 82nd birthday in 2012, he upped the ante, and today his children Susie, 65, Howard, 64 and Peter, 60, have each received about \$US2.5 billion, paid in annual instalments of about \$US185 million, depending on the stock price of the family company. Berkshire Hathaway, *I am confident you will use the money wisely, each in your own way*, he wrote to them. *Love, Dad.*

Each of his children has their own philanthropic foundation. Peter's focuses on ending violence, discrimination and the subordination of girls and women, while Susie is interested in public education, human services and social justice. Howard has, in many ways, been the boldest of the siblings, beginning his foray into philanthropy in South Africa, where he started by buying 2400 hectares of land to create a cheetah reserve, then broadened out to support vulnerable communities in some of the poorest countries in the world. In the 20 years since he established his own foundation, he's visited 152 countries and given away \$US1.4 billion. In the past 12 months alone, he spent \$US171 million on strategic conflict mitigation and food security projects in some of Africa's and central America's poorest and most unstable nations.

I first met Howard on an Italian coastguard boat during a rescue of a wooden refugee boat somewhere between the coast of Libya and Sicily. It was 2008, well before the Arab Spring, and I was on assignment for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Convinced he was a press agency photographer and that we'd been scooped, I furiously (and deliberately) stood in his frames to spoil them. In fact, he was taking photographs for a book on migration for *National Geographic*, which he ensured was sent to every member of the US Congress.

At lunch in Decatur a decade later, he chides me right back with a gale of laughter. "Don't you remember? I was on the other boat taking photos for the book and all I could think was, 'Who is that white woman on the deck spoiling my pictures?'" It wasn't until the rescue crew hosted a dinner on the jetty a few days later that I learnt his identity. A natural raconteur blessed with palpable *joie de vivre*, he was great company even for the coastguards, whose English was minimal. Still, my most vivid memory is of watching agog as he happily plopped his host's fragrant, artisanal Sicilian gelato into his Coke to make spiders.

We stayed in touch, chatted by email, shared events of interest. Then, a year or so later, I travelled to Africa to write about his foundation's food security programs. For more than a week, we travelled in a convoy of jeeps bristling with men and machine guns, burrowing deep into rural, conflict-torn Congo and the mountains of Rwanda. Howard's foundation had funded myriad projects in the region, including an ambitious trial of alternative fuels in a bid to save the rare mountain gorilla and protect villagers from the militia that controlled the charcoal trade.

By then, the foundation was funding projects to the tune of about \$US65 million a year, much focused on his dogged quest to experiment with biological and sustainable ways of upping farm productivity by regenerating Africa's depleted soils. Howard had also continued working on what are now eight photographic books



Top: Howard (in yellow coat) with mum Susan, brother Peter, sister Susie and relatives on his mother's side. Above: in Africa with an orphaned mountain gorilla; the species' dwindling population was an early focus of his philanthropy.

his favourite toys. Since he took on the sheriff's job he's made it a rule for himself to "really talk and listen" to the people he meets. "I could never have dreamed that you would find children who have not been fed properly in Decatur, living in filthy houses," he says. "This has been a huge education for me, knowledge you can't get unless you are out on the streets every day and you can walk into people's homes and really see how they live."

As we drive around town, he talks about meeting a child who started using cocaine at age eight; a girl whose baby was born with cocaine addiction; and a woman who told him she would kill for her next shot of heroin. "If people are willing to do that, the question for me is, 'Why?'" Howard says. "I have learnt a lot from drug addicts, from their history and experiences. Locking them up is not going to solve the problem, it is not going to get them off drugs. The problem we have in the US is that we don't have enough places to put them in for treatment and a shortage of resources to properly help when they get out of treatment."

Back in his sheriff's office the following morning, a stream of visitors passes through, reflecting a diary that is regularly packed from 7am to 11pm. Paperwork is piled haphazardly on the desk, while two phones and an iPad are open and pinging incessantly. By the middle of 2019, Howard says, regardless of their ability to pay, Decatur's citizens will have access to a brand-new drug detox and rehabilitation centre, spread over a nine-hectare campus complete with specially built transitional housing for the most vulnerable. A walking track and working orchard are on the plans, all of it funded by Howard's foundation.

He insists he would never have embarked on

this project were it not for his experience as sheriff, along with the advocacy of Tanya Andricks, chief executive of Decatur's only free hospital and medical centre, who even talked him into incorporating a dental clinic in the new centre. "I finally got Howard there when I reminded him that smiling matters," Andricks says. "I told him that when you are ashamed to smile, it is hard to heal, it is hard to seek employment, and it is hard to rebuild a sense of self-worth that has been shattered. He understood that straight away."

That afternoon, I'm given a tour of a multi-million-dollar residential police academy under construction on the city outskirts, also funded by Howard's foundation. The new facility will offer US police training curricula, using state-of-the-art equipment and innovative teaching techniques aimed at encouraging rookie police and corrections officers to think differently – and more empathetically – when contemplating the use of force to uphold the law. Tad Williams, the academy's commander and a former Marine and Illinois state police colonel, believes Howard's legacy will go beyond bricks and mortar. "I've been black-and-white all my career. Howard taught me the greys," says Williams. "He taught us to help when people deserve help ... we used to be 'Crime, just lock 'em up.'

Williams refers to the ongoing debate over

the shooting of unarmed black men by police officers. "Police academies turn out kids who are often still living with Mom and Dad. Weeks later, they are finished training and out in communities, drawing guns," he says. "Howard has given us the opportunity to teach kids from the ground up what it means to lead by example, to be disciplined – that if you take action out there on the streets, there will be a reaction."

Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Washington-based Police Executive Research Forum, is one of America's most esteemed thinkers in the field of law enforcement reform. He has worked with Howard over the past couple of years and says his contribution, particularly in funding the further education of senior American police, is little known but highly significant. Awarded an OBE in the UK for his own extensive work with British and US police, Wexler says Howard has paid for significant research studies and programs, including one which took leading officers from 25 American state police departments to the UK to see firsthand how unarmed police forces deal with knives and violent crime. "What he has done in Decatur ... well, I have never known a situation where a sheriff, someone actually in law enforcement, who knows and truly understands it, is a philanthropist, too, and can see something that's broken and just [try to] fix it," he says.

"I think this job has changed him. When he came in as a new sheriff, he was kind of a tough guy. He has evolved, he has seen the impact of the drug epidemic and it has had an enormous impact on him. The most significant was his recognition of the medical need ... that arrest does not cure addiction."

Adds Howard's operations lieutenant and Democrat candidate for the sheriff's job, Tony "Chubby" Brown: "Obviously, it is incredible

for us that he has the resources to bring in the

very best people to help us evaluate how to do

things better, serve our community better. But

the thing we're most grateful for is that we've

seen we cannot just arrest our way out of this

problem. We have had this warrior mentality

in the US, but we are not at war. We need to be

protectors; we need to do things to help indi-

viduals become more productive. Our mental-

ity has changed."

A creature of habit, Howard has lunch early

when he's working – 11.30am – and often at the

same eatery, Bizou. Over a meal of mayo-

slathered coleslaw, a four-cheese toastie and a

gallon of Coke, I ask if he's managed to win over

all his officers – he oversees 53 deputies and 73

correctional officers – with this new humanitar-

ian approach to law and order. "Not all of them

are there yet. I've been surprised by some who

are thinking differently though. I had a deputy I

thought was a real hard-arse come in and say,

'Hey, let's put this guy in treatment.'

The following night, I watch Howard and his

young patrol partner as they're called to a

house where an armed military veteran in his

40s has barricaded himself in the basement,

threatening suicide. For two hours, they stay

with the man, their own guns drawn, as a

trained negotiator is called in to talk him into

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Exhausted, Howard follows the ambulance

and waits to speak to the man alone in his hos-

pital bed, quietly reassuring him he will not

face charges and will receive psychological

help. "So, what is the next step? Is it to screw

his life up or try and help him?" Howard asks

later, visibly shaken by the close call. "He had a

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In an email a few weeks later, Howard tells

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WARREN BUFFETT'S own life story is, of course, the stuff of legend. Born with canny intuition and a prodigious mathematical brain, he made his fortune picking undervalued stocks for investment and sticking by them. Buffett senior's gentle eccentricities are well known: he still lives in the family home in Omaha, Nebraska – bought for \$US31,500 in 1958 – loves hamburgers, drinks litres of Cherry Coke every day, and is notoriously thrifty. Howard says his dad's philosophy has changed little since childhood, and it has clearly rubbed off. "I could have been born black or Hispanic in America. But I was not. It was a lesson I learnt as a child from my mom, too. She said that with privilege comes responsibility." When Howard was five, the family opened its home to a young Sudanese refugee – one of the first to arrive in the US – who lived with them until she finished university.

Looking back on his childhood, and despite his father's legendary thriftiness, he lacked nothing. "To be able to get out of bed every day, focus on school, prepare for a test and not worry about being abused or being hungry, about what might happen to your sister: that is a huge advantage."

Howard muses that he himself was not an easy child, restless, "moving all the time" and a bit of a handful as a teen. Finding a path in his 20s was vexed. He tried college, studying political science in three different colleges, but didn't like it. Then he took on a series of jobs, working as a packing clerk, then for a construction company and ploughing cornfields in Nebraska. It wasn't until he began driving a bulldozer and digging basements that he decided working the land would be his path. He learnt to farm by trial and error, establishing a pattern that would continue throughout his life. As a philanthropist, he's been an unabashed autodidact: naturally intuitive and hands-on in choosing the projects he funds, even more so when pondering whether there's a better way to get more bang for his billion or so bucks.

In Decatur, the 32-hectare farm he's rented from his dad since 1993 is now part of 770 hectares of commercial soy and corn operations, with a turnover of \$US1 million. "I am surprised, honestly, about how well things have worked out ..." he tells me pensively in the car one night. "I mean, I've always been really focused on something when I need to be, but I tend to want to do a lot of things at once and I have a lot of ideas all at once ... Yeah, my brain races. I am surprised it has all worked out okay."

The following night, I watch Howard and his young patrol partner as they're called to a house where an armed military veteran in his 40s has barricaded himself in the basement, threatening suicide. For two hours, they stay with the man, their own guns drawn, as a trained negotiator is called in to talk him into putting down his own pistol. Once he's surrendered his firearm, the man is cuffed and taken to hospital.

Exhausted, Howard follows the ambulance and waits to speak to the man alone in his hospital bed, quietly reassuring him he will not face charges and will receive psychological help. "So, what is the next step? Is it to screw his life up or try and help him?" Howard asks later, visibly shaken by the close call. "He had a job and would have lost it if we had charged him. What would that achieve? He felt he had failed his wife, failed his child, he couldn't see a way out. Law enforcement officers can – and should – make decisions to help people."

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Below: Warren Buffett, left, has named Howard, right, as his successor to take over the non-executive directorship of his investment company when he dies.