

Craig Shergold (Shepard?) is Alive and Well in England

According to the latest *Guinness Book of World Records*, after a trip to Congo in 2000, Richard Branch was treated for 32 varieties of parasites, including four new to science.

Not all world records are this easy to achieve. For example, I received a thick envelope in the mail last week from a local business that took the time to type up an appeal on watermarked letterhead that it had sent to 20 other local businesses.

It's a tragic story about a seven year old boy named Craig Shepard, who has a brain tumor and very little time to live. He allegedly contacted the Make-A-Wish Foundation expressing his desire to have an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records for collecting the most business cards.

Included in the envelope I received was a list of the 19 other businesses contacted (so we didn't duplicate our mailings), along with the names that were forwarded to them from earlier chain participants – over 200 of them.

If each of them sent a letter to 20 others as well, we're talking over 4,000 names on this one thread and growing. If even half of those contacted followed through, we're past 40,000. That's a lot of business cards, and we're just getting started.

The only problem with this whole story is that it's not true. More accurately, it *used* to be true, but not any more. It's hard to believe that so much good will and fine intentions could wreak havoc, but they have. And they still are.

There really was such a child, and he really did have brain and spine cancer that was thought to be terminal. In 1989 an appeal was made on behalf of this then 9-year-old English boy for two things - a sponsor to finance his surgery and a world-record number of get-well cards.

By 1990, 16 million cards had arrived, and his wish had come true. According to the 1997 edition of The Guinness Book of World Records, by May 1991 he had collected 33 million.

The boy's tumor was successfully removed (courtesy of a U.S. doctor) in March 1991, and he has been cancer-free ever since. He is now a healthy 26-year old with a degree in computer science.

Several versions of this chain-letter appeal are circulating. The one I received indicates the boy's name is Craig Shepard, but it has morphed over the years from Craig to Greg and from Shergold (his real name) to Stafford, Shelford, Sherwood and others. The original request was for greeting cards, not business cards.

Just one of the addresses used in many of the "request for cards" letter is that of Perimeter Center East in Atlanta, which - before the emergence of the hoax - was the office of the Children's Wish Foundation International. The U.S. Postal Service in Atlanta now holds the hoax mailings (more than 100 million so far) for a required length of time and - after they remain unclaimed - releases them to an Atlanta paper recycler.

I first became aware of the card-writing campaign in 1990, when my business received several of these chain letters and Shergold - having already achieved the world record - was desperately trying to stop them. This thing refuses to die, largely because there are so many goodhearted people in the world. I was quoted in a Press-Citizen news article on August 9, 1990 as saying, "It's one of those things that give you the warm fuzzies. But it's gotten out of control."

The Make-A-Wish Foundation - a very worthwhile charity - has devoted a page on its web site (as has Children's Wish Foundation International) that begs people not to participate in these chain letters. They have also set up an 800 number people can call to hear a recorded message about Craig Shergold and other chain mail efforts: 800-215-1333, extension 4.

Having learned its lesson about dying child appeals, Guinness World Records retired the category for the most get-well cards, leaving Craig's

1992 record of 33 million unchallenged. Cards continue to flow in, though, and the latest guesstimate has it that over 350 million have been received. Years ago, Craig's Shelby Road home in England was granted the British equivalent of its own postal code.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, chain letters are only illegal if they request something of monetary value or include some kind of threat about what will happen to you if you fail to comply. But before you spend any time and effort on one, visit www.urbanlegends.about.com and type a few key words into the search field – you'll find out in a hurry if you're doing any good or just killing time and trees.

And if you are looking to have your name listed as a world record holder in any category, I recommend one that does not involve parasites.