BUCKING TRADITION

From the segregated South to Franco’s politically repressive Spain, B Wardlaw’s peripatetic youth shaped his lifelong commitment to human rights.

B Wardlaw (William C. Wardlaw III) is well aware that he did not grow up to become the man his family expected him to be. Thanks to his grandfather’s early investment in Coca-Cola, the third-generation soda scion grew up in a world of segregated privilege in Atlanta, attending elite private schools that were supposed to groom him “to become a member of the ruling class,” he says.

Instead, B, now 70, traveled far and wide, seeking to escape his childhood experience of segregation. Along the way, he became close to political prisoners both in Europe and the United States, and it was those relationships that eventually led him to become an active supporter of Amnesty International.

B remembers the white enclave of his childhood as “the epitome of the southern racist environment.” As an 8-year-old, B wrote poems to his mother that hint at the anguish of segregation. He felt a strong sense that he did not belong in his world.

After a brief stint in the army and obligatory undergraduate studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, B followed the howl of the Beat poets northward the moment his monthly trust fund allowance kicked in. In 1961 he moved into a fifth-floor walk-up in New York City’s Greenwich Village and, in his quest to write the Great American Novel, began a life of “contrived poverty.” A few years later, he boarded a freighter headed for Yugoslavia and disembarked in Tangiers, the first port of call, before moving to Spain, then in the dictatorial grip of General Francisco Franco.

In Málaga, he sparked a friendship with Juan Chaparro, a political prisoner who had spent eight years in prison for his opposition to the Franco regime. Chaparro’s imprisonment had left him with tuberculosis and a crippled arm. “It was a very important moment for me,” says B. “I was very moved by the fight against fascism.”

Upon returning to the United States, he took on a more active role in his family’s charitable foundation, and his first recommendation was to make a grant to AI. He urged AI to take up the cause of 1970s radical Susan Rosenberg, who had been caged in the high-security isolation unit in the basement of the Federal Correction Institution in Lexington, Kentucky. AI examined the unit’s practices, which included isolation and sensory deprivation, and released a report calling them torture. For his part, B spent two weeks in jail for refusing to stay away from the courthouse during court proceedings that eventually led to the closure of the unit.

Today, B remains deeply interested in the human rights of women and has been especially supportive of AI’s Stop Violence Against Women campaign. “Women’s rights are the basis of everything. I’ve been really proud of AI focusing on that,” B says.

He has also found opportunities to bring the human rights paradigm to the corporate world. After an AI meeting in which he was seated with Kenyan Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai, an environmental activist and human rights defender, he was inspired to initiate a shareholder initiative to get Coca-Cola to stop using genetically engineered corn in its products.

Now more than ever, it is critical that AI stay visible on the streets, says B. Although he expresses optimism about some of the steps President Obama and his administration have taken, he warns: “We can’t expect a politician being pulled in every direction not to go in the other direction if we ourselves don’t pull. Amnesty’s credibility in the world is so important—we must remain alert and very vocal.”