No Child Left Behind

July 1, 2009 By James Wortman

When he joined the Peace Corps in 2004, Steve Kallaugher did not anticipate that his volunteer HIV/AIDS work in Swaziland would become his calling. But after witnessing how AIDS had made orphans of thousands of children in the tiny, landlocked sub-Saharan African country—which boasts the world's highest adult HIV prevalence at more than 40 percent—he was stirred to act.

"There is no indication whatsoever that the prevalence rate is going to drop," says Kallaugher, 57, who, though HIV negative, has been involved in HIV/AIDS advocacy efforts since 1983. "And the kids are all going to pay more and more. So when [Swaziland's] national AIDS council asked me if I could do something to help them I just jumped on it."

In 2005, Kallaugher teamed with the Swazi government's National Emergency Response Council on HIV/AIDS to found Young Heroes, a fund-raising organization that helps feed, clothe and educate more than 1,000 AIDS orphans. The nonprofit group was recently presented to UNICEF's Global Orphan Alliance as a best practice that other countries should adopt.

Why Young Heroes? "They've got to be heroes just to make it through the day," Kallaugher explains. "They've got nobody, they don't eat every day, they're in tattered hand-me-downs, and many don't have money to go to school. That's just the physical part. That's not [counting] the grief and the fear they have to live with."

Earlier this summer, Young Heroes debuted a fund-raising effort titled "100 Parties for the Orphans of AIDS" on June 16. On that date in 1976, thousands of Soweto children walked out of their classrooms to protest poor education under apartheid. Fifteen years later, The Organization of African Unity declared it a day of remembrance, calling it the Day of the African Child.

"But as is so often the case, it has [historically been] a day of empty talk," Kallaugher says. "And we thought, 'Let's try and turn it into a day of action.'"

Young Heroes asked people across the United States to hold 100 different house parties, raising $500 each. That $50,000 is enough to feed more than 300 orphans for a year.

Young Heroes is now working with the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation to establish a medical care program for its HIV-positive orphans by year's end.

“I went into [Swaziland] not knowing what I was going to do, and now four years later, there’s 1,000 kids eating and going to school every day,” Kallaugher says. “There are days when I step back and say, ‘Not bad.’” Not bad at all.

To learn more about Young Heroes, visit youngheroes.org.sz.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/orphans-Swaziland-HIV-16802-3329