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Group strives to make a mark on African kids

By Kelli Knudsen

Journal staff

After its inception in 1993 as a small project started by John and Patty Noel to promote tourism into countries that did not have many visitors, the Make a Mark Foundation, which is run by Noel Group, has grown into a charity that makes a difference in places far beyond its Stevens Point home.

"Make a Mark is a charitable foundation that really focuses on initiatives that benefit children, the disadvantaged and to promote diversity," said Dan McGinnity, vice president of communications for Travel Guard.

"Once in a while we get involved in doing things that are specifically involved in tourism, but most of the time we look for projects that will help with children and babies in the world," John Noel said.

Make a Mark has taken on many different projects over the years including rebuilding a kindergarten in Klipi, Croatia; building a computer lab in Eleuthera, Bahamas; and building a hospital wing in Rostov-Veliky, Russia.

For about the last 10 years, Make a Mark has turned much of its attention to sub-Saharan Africa, where millions of children have been orphaned after their parents died of AIDS.

"In Botswana, there are 900 families that are being raised by the children, of which the senior member of the household is 9 years old or younger," Noel said. "Nine hundred families that are living in little cardboard boxes, where the 9-year old is taking care of the 7-year old, the 6-year old, the 2-year old and the 1-year old because the mothers and fathers have died and the grandmas and grandpas are homeless as well."

Projects in Africa have included providing funding to build volunteer quarters to house people caring for children at the Nyumbani Orphanage in Karen, Kenya, which houses more than 80 children, and providing funds for a residential building, a small barn for cows and a chicken house for the Ntokozweni Village of the Vulnerable in Kwazulu-Nata, South Africa.

Make a Mark recently finished a project with partners from all over the world to build a self-sustaining village community for orphaned children and elders who have lost their caregivers to AIDS in Kitui, Kenya. They also are starting a new project in Nandi, Kenya, to build an orphanage and primary school that will bring in enough revenue to sustain the orphanage and provide those orphans with a free education.

Make a Mark has partnered with many other organizations and has found support for its projects from many influential people in politics and religion.

Noel met the president of Kenya, Mwai Kibaki, who agreed to help support Make a Mark's efforts for the homeless children in his country. Kenya's first lady Lucy Kibaki even offered to be the patroness of all the villages that were built there.

"Through several meetings and discussions, Pope John Paul II agreed to put together a Vatican stamp that was used to be a fundraiser for raising funds for Nyumbani (Village), and that Vatican stamp raised almost a million dollars to help support the project," Noel said.

Along with efforts to make a difference in countries far from Wisconsin, Make a Mark also contributes to the local community through an annual United Way pledge fund drive, a spring Easter basket drive, which raised more than 630 food baskets for a local food pantry.

One reason fundraising for Make a Mark is successful is because Noel Group and Travel Guard cover all the administrative expenses of the fund, so 100 percent of donations go to providing for the projects it is involved in, Noel said.

Noel said Make a Mark reflects the company's values, which is why it is so strongly supported by employees.

"Many employees have helped us with this project, even the most recent pie eating competition where we had hundreds of onlookers and volunteers. Those kinds of things, while they are fun, are great because the contributions from the employees will help support 60 orphans in Africa and for that we are very thankful that it has grown from a small project to where size makes a difference," he said.

Each year there is a week-long campaign to raise money from Noel Group employees. This year's campaign was particularly successful, with donations from employees up 21 percent from last year, McGinnity said.

"I think our employees are very enthusiastic about it," he said. "Providing a opportunity for our employees to give back to our community, both our local and global community, is an important part of who we are as a company, and it's very important to our employees as well."

For more information about Make a Mark, call 345-1041, extension 11360.

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