

# A sacred service

Interview with Todd Lorentz  
by Jason Francis

*One Child's Village is a nongovernmental organization based in Alberta, Canada, run by volunteers who seek to improve the lives of HIV/AIDS orphaned children in Kenya. The volunteers believe that caring for children is a "sacred service" and aim to create the conditions, training, and resources necessary to provide for the physical, emotional, mental and overall spiritual welfare of these orphaned children. Todd Lorentz, managing director of One Child's Village, was interviewed by Jason Francis for **Share International**.*

*Share International: What was the inspiration behind the formation of One Child's Village?*

Todd Lorentz: For much of my life I have been aware of the dreadful conditions suffocating the lives of millions of people in the developing world. Like many others, I have always wanted to do something that would have a meaningful impact on their lives.

In 2005, I traveled to Nairobi, Kenya, to speak at a conference called 'Globalization for the Common Good'. During that visit I was fortunate to meet a man named Charles Ouma Odour who, himself orphaned at a young age, had dedicated his life to helping other orphans. He had formed an organization called Mercy Children's Center and was caring for dozens of children using his own income and donations from a few well-wishers. I was impressed by his compassion and was inspired to find some way to support him.

On my return to Canada, I started a charitable organization to help Charles and the children. I gathered a few friends and associates together and – almost effortlessly – started our organization. Inspired by the familiar African proverb "it takes a whole village to raise a child", I began to think about the notion of what 'my village' really meant. In a world with one humanity, of course, there are no real boundaries where we can say that we are no longer responsible for other human beings. We all belong to the community of humanity and, for any child in the world, we are all a part of their village and have a responsibility for their welfare. From this idea came the name for

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One Child's Village, along with all that the concept of interconnectedness implies.

We made our organization completely volunteer based: no one receives wages or income from the funds donated to us. We keep our overheads to an absolute minimum and almost all of the funds supporting our work go directly to the welfare of the orphans.

*SI: Yearly, how many children are orphaned by the HIV/AIDS epidemic and how many children are infected with HIV/AIDS themselves?*

TL: Accurate numbers are sometimes hard to acquire because of the difficulties in surveying populations in impoverished areas. However, UNAIDS currently estimates that there are well over 12 million children in sub-Saharan Africa who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS. In 2003, there were approximately 650,000 AIDS orphans in Kenya, with 150,000 Kenyans dying each year of AIDS. That number continues to increase dramatically and it is expected that Kenya will have over 1 million orphans by 2010.

The infection rate of very young children is a bit lower than the average national rate of 6.8 per cent among adults. The hardest hit group is young girls between the ages of 15 and 24 who suffer infection rates

of 20 per cent. This is the standard in the area of western Kenya where we work.

These are staggering numbers and governments in these developing nations are simply unable to deal effectively with the incredible tragedy unfolding in their communities. The world has largely turned its back on these children and denied them their right to the most basic of needs. These children are the most vulnerable people on our planet and it is hard to stand by and watch rich nations summon up trillions of dollars overnight to bail out investment banks and hedge funds yet fail to allocate even a fraction of that to save millions of lives. You have to ask what has happened to our humanity.

In many areas where we work it is also believed that an orphan brought into your home may steal the blessing from your own family. So these children, after suffering the loss of their parents, are abandoned not only by their country and the world community, but sometimes by their close relatives as well. Eventually, without support, many are left to survive on the streets – often selling their bodies or working as slaves for their subsistence.

*SI: How does One Child's Village address the needs of HIV/AIDS orphans and where does your organization primarily work?*

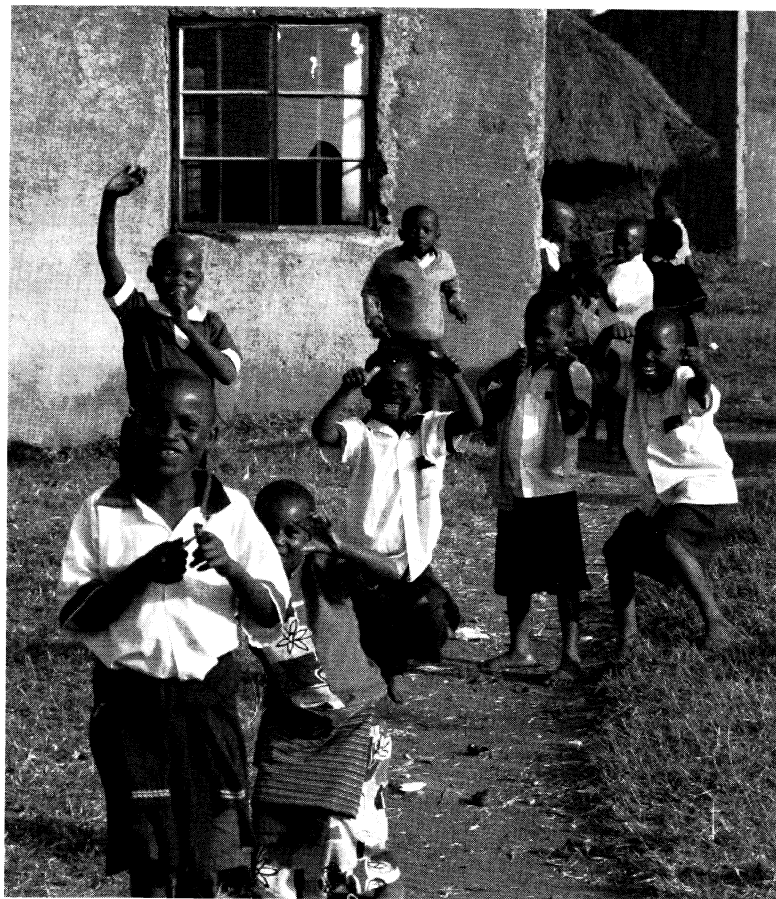
TL: We are currently working in Kenya with two elementary schools, both run by our partners at Mercy Children's Center. The first school presently holds about 120 students and is located in Kawangware – a slum district in the suburbs of Nairobi. The conditions there are very difficult for the children and, while many of them live with either a surviving infected parent or grandparent, they depend upon us to supply much of their life support. This includes food, clothes, water and everything necessary for their education. It is a heartbreaking situation and it has been difficult to develop this school further because we do not own the property or buildings. Many children were also traumatized by the post-election violence last year and this has created an additional challenge for them emotionally and psychologically.

Our second school, in the rural village of Bumala in western Kenya, supports over 150 students and has progressed more rapidly. Because we own the land there we were able to expand our infrastructure more quickly and in a unique fashion. As a young organization, we were faced with limited funds and so could not afford the initial cost of \$150,000 or so needed to build a single modern brick and mortar school. Instead, we studied the methods used by the local village population to build their homes – a type of mud-and-wattle construction – and applied that design to the construction of our school. This enabled us to hire local labor, including some of the widowed HIV-infected mothers of our orphaned children, to help build the school. In this way, a small amount of funding (about \$20,000) made a significant impact in the community. We were up and running with a full school year ahead of when we had expected.

This year we are planning further expansions with the hopes of building a small on-site center for an international volunteer program that can generate income to support the school's operating costs. To build an entire school for 150 children, and have it completely self-sufficient in two years, sounds like an enormous task but, as we've shown, it is definitely possible. With more funding, we could duplicate this model in many areas and put thousands of children in school within a very short period of time, while also creating hundreds of jobs in these local economies.

*SI: Could you describe the Mercy Children's Center and the relationship between*

**"These children are the most vulnerable people on our planet."**



*their outreach and the focus of One Child's Village?*

TL: It is critical for us to have good partners in the developing world who, like us, strive to keep the needs of the children a priority. Mercy Children's Center plays a critical role in delivering services to the children who would otherwise be condemned to death by their circumstances. The directors and teachers at our school in Bumala live and raise their own families in that area and share a deep connection with the local community. They have a relationship and understanding of the community that we, coming from a different culture entirely, would have difficulty establishing.

On the other hand, One Child's Village, based in Canada, is fortunate to be located in an area of the world that benefits greatly from access to a multitude of resources. Our work is to channel those resources to the benefit of these children in the most transparent and effective way possible. It has turned out to be a very efficient and effective partnership. The strengths of each organization complement one another in a way that radically changes the outlook for the children and fulfills our shared vision. It is wonderful to see our two cultures work together with such ease and co-operation.

*SI: What age are the children that your organization and the Mercy Children's Center are helping?*

TL: We start the children in our school at a very young age – around three to four years old: a crucial formative period for children. Our first priority is to ensure that they are receiving at least some proper nutrition along with clothes, medical care, and rules for personal hygiene. They receive not only a proper education but also a type of parental influence, instruction and personal care that they might not otherwise receive at home. We school them up to the age of about 11 or 12 when we try to integrate them into the public system. Eventually, we would like to build our own secondary and trade schools in order to provide a full education without separating them from their school mates upon whom, because they are orphans, they have built a strong social dependence. These are foundational years for children and a failure in their development at this stage can have an enormous impact on them, and therefore our society, for the rest of their lives.

*SI: Could you describe the overall impact – social, economic, academic and emotional – of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on a*

*community as a whole as well as particularly on the lives of children?*

TL: The impact on a society is absolutely devastating, and on a scale unheard of in human history. It is strange how we in the developed world have become so accustomed to accepting entire societies being ripped apart by the effects of HIV/AIDS, poverty, lack of water resources, disease, and other critical social issues. We would never stand for such a travesty within our own nations yet express only marginal concern when it happens to our fellow human beings in other areas of the world.

In Kenya alone, 300-400 people die every day from AIDS. This means that hundreds more orphans are created every day, countless businesses collapse, hundreds of families may lose their primary wage earner, communities are ravaged, children abandoned and social stability threatened. This occurs relentlessly across sub-Saharan Africa and the rest of the developing world. The wasted human potential is staggering and the moral implications are beyond shame for the western world.

There is also an enormous cost to the global community as we look to the future. We are all very aware in our own community of the consequences – both emotionally and physically – of abandoning a child during their formative years. They are often forced to turn to self-destructive behaviors to survive. Crime, prostitution, drug use and other coping mechanisms are familiar companions to many children and youth faced with these circumstances. Now imagine that occurring as a global social phenomenon, affecting 12-15 million orphans in sub-Saharan Africa alone over the coming decade. How will the world deal with a generation of children that have been hardened through neglect by the world community? Our current disregard for the care of these children is fostering such a future global crisis and will eventually have a negative effect on the global community as a whole. So, as you can see, our work is more than simply providing food or education. It is really working to fulfill the basic responsibilities that we all share in our interconnected world community.

*SI: When caring for orphaned children it must be difficult to provide for the emotional needs of children, which are usually taken care of primarily by parents and extended family. How are the love, care and attention needed for a proper emotional and*

*mental development manifested in the lives of children when the parents are no longer there to provide for such needs?*

TL: The stability and community that we provide for them in our schools makes all the difference and it is an enormous responsibility for our teachers who are faced with the additional challenges of ‘standing in’ as a parental figure for many of the children.

We have a strong idealistic vision about how we would eventually like to fully support the children but we begin in very practical ways by ensuring that their basic needs are met first. Food, water, clothing and a secure place to live and learn are an essential background to fulfilling higher emotional, psychological and spiritual needs. Many of our children come to us lacking even these basic resources of life. At the same time, we provide structure in their lives and nurture the sense of belonging to a community within the school. We model respect, tolerance and love, and many of them look to their school friends as family.

*SI: What type of support does One Child's Village need to sustain its work and what does your organization and the Mercy Children's Center need right now?*

TL: Certainly funding plays a crucial role in our ability to provide adequate support to the orphans, and our work at One Child's Village relies entirely on funds donated by public supporters and through various fundraising events. Our focus at this time is to make our current schools self-sustaining and independent of outside aid. Part of our success has been in avoiding over-extending ourselves in ways that are unsustainable. We also rely entirely on volunteers, and are always expanding our volunteer membership so that we can do more.

Beyond that, however, we are in the planning stages of building another new school with additional living facilities for the children. This would allow us to better serve the needs of the children presently living in the slum. The purchase of new lands and construction of both a school and living quarters for 150 students could easily be accomplished for around \$150,000 using the models that we have developed so far.

*SI: What is needed in terms of long-term development?*

TL: What is needed is a comprehensive international plan, along the lines of the Brandt Commission, for changing the global economic policies that prolong inhumane

conditions. Poverty is a manufactured condition in the world. It persists because it is deliberately maintained. It is a fallacy to believe that poverty has somehow haphazardly arisen in only the developing nations of the world, or that it is caused by some inherent weakness in those societies or regions. It is really the political and economic policies of the rich and powerful – both within those countries and internationally – that prevent greater development in those impoverished states. Until we understand that fundamental global changes must be made to ensure a dignified existence for all, organizations like ours will remain obligated by our basic humanity and compassion to help those who continue to suffer.

Information: [www.onechildsvillage.org](http://www.onechildsvillage.org) ●

## Trends

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### Nature knows best

On the battlefield, and in accidents, one of the major causes of death is haemorrhaging that cannot be stopped. A naturally occurring substance extracted from the shells of crustaceans has been found to stop bleeding within one to five minutes. The substance, called chitosan, is obtained from shrimp shells and is being incorporated into new bandages now in use in war zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Kenton Gregory, a cardiologist from Providence St. Vincent Medical Center in Portland, Oregon, USA, says that unlike the gauze that traditional bandages are made from, chitosan interacts with our blood cells because its molecules carry a positive charge.

“The problem with gauze is that it really has no clotting ability,” Gregory explains. “Generally the gauze is just saturated with blood, and the bleeding continues. The chitosan has a positive charge. All of our cells, our red blood cells, the outer membranes have negative charges. And the negative charge of the red blood cell is attracted to the positive charge of the chitosan. As soon as they touch, the red cell fuses and forms a clot against the chitosan, and that forms a very tight, adherent clot, and a tight adherence to the surface of the wound.” In time, chitosan breaks down, making it a fully biodegradable bandage. (Source: [naturalnews.com](http://naturalnews.com)) ●