

# AIDS & Orphans

## FROM STEVENS POINT TO NAIROBI: WISCONSIN COMPANY EMBRACES AIDS ORPHANS

Like all businessmen, when John Noel founded the Noel Group—a travel insurance and services company based in Stevens Point, Wisconsin—he hoped to make some money. But he also knew that he wanted to give something back to the community he was serving.

As his company grew to become a diversified, global organization that included Travel Guard, the largest provider of travel insurance and assistance in the United States and Canada, the community it hoped to serve also grew.

In 1993, Noel Group established a humanitarian foundation called *Make A Mark*, which works to help children and disabled adults by partnering with local organizations in developing countries.

For the past decade, Noel Group has focused on initiatives to help the victims of the AIDS pandemic in Africa.

Noel chose to focus on AIDS because he was disturbed by the sight of orphans in Nairobi, Lusaka, and Johannesburg—many of whom spend their days congregating at traffic lights begging, sniffing glue, and stealing.

“Perhaps the most tragic evidence of our failure to urgently address this horrific pandemic are the 14 million orphaned children, a number expected to double by the end of this decade,” Noel said. “Can you imagine what life must be like for these abandoned children? No parents, no love, no care, and no future.”

In 1999, the Noel Group began working with the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund and created the Ntokozweni Village in the Kwa Zulu Natal region of South Africa. Ntokozweni is a self-sustaining facility that provides food, shelter, and occupational training for children and elderly left homeless by AIDS.

Ntokozweni is located in an area where the AIDS pandemic has left hundreds of thousands of children and elders without caregivers. At Ntokozweni, the elders nurture the kids and grow crops and perform

chores for the common good of the village. The elderly introduce the children to values and in return they are provided with room, board, and the love they once had with their own children.

Now the Noel Group is building a global coalition of partners to create larger intergenerational, self-sustaining communities based on the Ntokozweni model throughout Africa.

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With the support of Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki and his wife Lucy, the Noel Group has secured the land and is about to begin construction on the first of eight planned villages in Kenya.

Located in Kitui, about three hours southeast of the Kenyan capital of Nairobi, the first village will serve as a pilot to establish parameters and benchmarks for future villages throughout Africa.

“Our vision is that these communities will become the antithesis of how abandoned children and elders now live in abject poverty,” Noel said. “The children and elders will have clean housing, food, clinics, and schools. They will grow up with values they have never felt. It will be a new way of life for them.”

Because the intergenerational, self-sustaining communities concept is one of the few HIV/AIDS initiatives that addresses the looming orphan crisis, it has attracted significant attention and support of a coalition of public and private sector partners.

“What’s most exciting to me is the grassroots support we’ve received for this project,” Noel said. “A number of local companies have sponsored employee-focused fundraising campaigns to benefit



the orphans and elders of Africa; and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for this project."

The Noel Group is now working with several GBC member companies that are interested in running similar campaigns.

Noel says he is often asked why a business like his would devote so much time and resources to humanitarian efforts.

"Quite honestly, I believe that every company can and should base its activities not solely on profits, but on principles that reflect social and human rights. When you think of the millions of orphaned children that the AIDS pandemic has created, how can you turn your backs? As caring, compassionate human beings, we owe these children nothing less than our best efforts to give them hope, give them love, and give them a future."

Moreover, Noel added, showing such humanitarian concern has been good for business. He said his employees enjoy working for a company that stands for something beyond bottom line results, a fact that is in both the waiting list of people to work for the

company and a turnover rate that is four or five times lower than industry averages.

He said Noel Group clients appreciate doing business with a company that has principles that lead to longer-term relationships that are based on mutual benefits, not cutthroat tactics.

"An important part of our mission as a value-based company is giving back to the global community that we serve," Noel said. "For our company, that means working with organizations, communities, and governments to help bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots in the world." ■

John Noel,  
CEO of the Noel Group,  
with AIDS orphan in Kenya

