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Child's Dream Foundation Helps Mekong Region's Needy

Regula Brechbühl, Online Publications

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28.08.2009 The aid organization Child's Dream Foundation was established in 2003 by Swiss nationals Marc Jenni and Daniel Siegfried, who had previously worked in the financial sector. By helping those in need, they found the happiness and meaning that had been missing in their lives. The organization now includes a staff of 30, who work to build preschools and schools as well as to promote healthcare. A visit to the organization's headquarters in Chiang Mai, Thailand.



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Finally, with the help of directions communicated by cell phone in the Thai language, the taxi driver is able to find the building. The windowless structure stands out among the

surrounding one-story buildings. "Until just over a year ago, we worked out of a small house; now this is the headquarters of Child's Dream," says Daniel Siegfried, one of the founders of this charitable organization. "The contributions of three donors allowed us to buy this building; otherwise we would not have been able to afford it. When we travel, we almost always stay with friends. Our policy is to use less than ten percent of our donations for administrative costs, a minimal amount compared with the 40 percent spent by some organizations in the United States, for example." Together with Marc Jenni, Daniel Siegfried founded Child's Dream six years ago. Both men had lived in Asia for several years while working in the financial sector – and had seen for themselves the problems plaguing that region. As time went on, they felt increasingly compelled by their sense of justice to take action. They decided to devote their knowledge and energies to helping needy children. "Many humanitarian disasters take place in the Greater Mekong Subregion," says Daniel Siegfried. "There is widespread poverty and disease, political persecution, and sexual exploitation. And children are most severely affected." Many of them have come to Thailand as refugees or illegal immigrants, and since they are stateless and undocumented, they have no access to the Thai system, which means that they are not entitled to use such public institutions as hospitals and – most importantly – schools.

Donations from All over the World

These problems are the focus of the work of Child's Dream, which implements programs to improve healthcare for children while also building preschools, schools and other educational facilities and providing educational materials for over 55,000 children. "We are delighted that donors have responded to our 'let's get to work' attitude. At first, 90 percent of our donations came from Switzerland, but now 50 percent of our funding is from countries like Singapore, Japan, and Hong Kong. The Credit Suisse APAC Philanthropy Committee has just awarded us a grant of USD 250,000 - our largest single corporate donation to date. This will allow us to build 30 new classrooms!" Daniel Siegfried's enthusiasm is undiminished, even after over 60 projects have been successfully completed. He now has the support of a staff of 30 in promoting these good causes. Three years ago, a third Swiss national, Manuela Bianchi, joined the organization. "At that time, Marc and Dani had only four employees, and one of them was the housekeeper," says Ms. Bianchi, who had formerly worked in Human Resources in Asia. Her experience in the Asian labor market has not only led to an increase in donations, but it has also allowed the organization to hire a large number of people within a short period of time, making additional projects possible.

Shortages on Every Front

Apart from donations, having good people is critical to the success of Child's Dream. Every time a project solved one problem, others came to the fore: energy or water shortages, or an outbreak of malaria. Child's Dream had limited its mandate to helping children, but as Daniel Siegfried points out, "Our approach to sustainable development meant not only helping children to develop into responsible, active members of the community, but also ensuring that their villages were able to shape their own future. With this in mind, we established the diversethics Foundation in 2006."

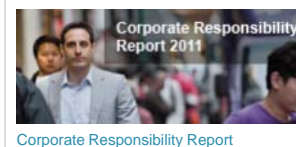
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Four long-term programs are now under way under the auspices of this foundation. The Malaria Control program works with a clinic in border regions to test the population for this disease, since early detection allows for successful treatment. The Basic Health Interventions for Children program seeks to ensure that pregnant women receive the best possible nutrition and reduce infant mortality, which is extremely high in many poor regions. Another program was established in the wake of the destruction caused by Cyclone Nargis; diversethics Foundation provides onsite aid in the form of emergency medical assistance, and is also helping to rebuild infrastructure and restore food production. The fourth program was created to enable students from neighboring countries to study at Thailand's universities.

Scholarships as the Only Chance for a Better Life

Students find out about these scholarships only through word of mouth, since computers, internet access, and even typewriters are rare in their home countries. "Applications – most of them handwritten – find their way to us in a variety of unusual ways, some being hand-delivered by a priest," explains Manuela Bianchi. "An institute collects and sorts the applications for us, and then we carry out the selection process." "We look for sponsors only after we have chosen the students. There was clearly an urgent need for scholarship money, and we intended to meet that need in one way or another," says Daniel Siegfried. And Manuela Bianchi adds, "It makes sense to support students, since they are potential agents of change who will take democratic ideals back with them to their home countries." An initial group of eight students was selected in 2006, and today four of them are receiving assistance from Credit Suisse. The program has now grown to include 79 students, a good two-thirds of whom are women. "We are extremely proud of our first eight students, all of whom have consistently earned excellent grades. They recognize that this is probably their only opportunity to change their lives, and they must not squander it," says Manuela Bianchi, obviously pleased by the success of this program. It is clear from the low dropout rate that these young people are very serious about their studies. Over the past three years, only five students have left the program – two of them moved to the United States, one had a child and one left for unknown reasons.

The Path to Personal Happiness

But what will happen to these students after graduation? A third of them will return to their home countries and pass on what they have learned, for example as teachers. Another third will work for an NGO, as journalists, translators, or project managers. The rest have not yet decided on their goals, but many of them will pursue a career in healthcare. Another option, a program called Business Angels, has been available for one year; during their last year of university studies, students can submit a proposal for a sustainable project that fulfills the following conditions: It must create at least one job, benefit the community, cost less than USD 20,000 in startup funds, and be self-supporting after a certain length of time. For instance, they might open an office supply store or a small lending library. The leaders of the organization sometimes discuss the question of whether these young people should be required to return to their home countries, or whether they should have the opportunity to move to the United States, for example, or to work in a bank. So far, none of them has chosen to do so, and this is likely to remain the case. Indeed, if the attitude of these young people is at all similar to that of the founders of Child's Dream, they, too, will choose a path of serving others – and they will recognize that it can lead to their own happiness as well. This was true of Marc Jenni, who enjoyed his work in the financial sector, but sensed that something was missing in his life. He found that missing piece in his work for the organization, helping the needy. Surely Daniel Siegfried speaks for both of the founders of Child's Dream in his response to the question of what has motivated him to become involved in charitable work: "It just feels exactly right."

Child's Dream

Child's Dream Foundation, established in 2003 by the Swiss nationals Marc Jenni and Daniel Siegfried, is headquartered in Chiang Mai, Thailand. It encourages disadvantaged village communities in the Greater Mekong Subregion to take control of their own futures. The organization works closely with these communities to raise the standard of children's health and education and improve their families' socioeconomic conditions.

Child's Dream focuses its efforts on educational infrastructure (preschools, primary and secondary schools, vocational schools, institutions of higher education). The organization also works to improve healthcare, through such programs such as the Children Medical Fund, and provides educational materials for over 55,000 children.

– [Child's Dream](#)

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