COLUMN

Peace Village International: Ongoing Patient Reports?

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Citation

Global Adv Health Med.
2014;3(3):102-105. DOI:
10.7453/gahmj.2013.085

Peace Village International

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“Once upon a time there was a small village...” This is the beginning of many stories about brave and virtuous people that usually end with the sentence, “and they lived happily ever after.” The “fairy tale” that is going to be told here has not come to an end yet, although many people work and strive for it. Surprising? No! Let the story be told from the beginning.

Once upon a time, more specifically in the year 1967, there was a small village named Oberhausen-Schmachtendorf. It is located in western Germany in a region called “Ruhrgebiet.” It happened that upsetting news stories and pictures from the Six-Day War and the Vietnam War found their way into the living rooms of many German families also in Oberhausen. That is how people learned about children who were wounded in these wars and who could not receive any medical care, which meant that many of them died or suffered greatly.

Many people were affected by these pictures and

thought that someone should help these boys and girls. There also was a group of men and women, including the former mayor of Oberhausen, Protestant and Catholic clergymen, and other citizens from all social orders, who did not just think but also acted. Their idea to help those ill and wounded children took shape in an organization that was named Peace Village International, initially planned to exist temporarily until the wars were over—this was 46 years ago—and it still exists today!

The founders of Peace Village had the opinion it was not enough to patch up wounds; they wanted to stand up for a more peaceful world. These thoughts have built the base for the three divisions of Peace Village’s humanitarian work that have been established during the following years.

HOPE MADE OF STONES

It all began In 1967 with many stones stacked one

Patients create artwork at Peace Village International.

upon another. The founders of Peace Village and many volunteers from nearby started to build a home where children were supposed to live as long as necessary until they could return to their home countries. The cornerstone was laid on July 6, 1967. The first children from Vietnam were flown to Germany in December, treated in German hospitals, and rehabilitated in the Peace Village in Oberhausen-Schmachtendorf.

However, the Vietnamese children were not the only ones who found a second home in Oberhausen for a limited time. Children from different countries, including Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Tajikistan, and many more, followed after them. This is what Peace Village calls “individual case help.” Fortunately, healthcare in Vietnam has improved to a degree where Peace Village does not need to fly children to Germany anymore.

Instead, Angola and Afghanistan have become the countries from which most of the children receive help from Peace Village International today. Four times a year, aid missions with chartered airplanes take place—two to Angola and two to Afghanistan combined with Central Asia and the Caucasus. The last aid mission took place in August 2013, and it was the 67th mission to Afghanistan. The next one will be in November 2014 for children from Angola for the 53rd time.

One could consider these aid missions some kind of exchange program. During those aid missions, ill and wounded children from the aforementioned regions are flown to Germany in order to receive medical treatments that they need very urgently but cannot access in their home countries. Conversely, all those children whose treatments have been finished successfully are returned home to their families. This way, around 500 children per year get a second chance with regard to health in Germany and a further 500 return to their home countries after full recovery. Those children are always accompanied by some employees of Peace Village and also by employees of the foreign partner organizations Peace Village is cooperating with. Medical treatments are either in-patient or ambulant in about 100 hospitals all over Germany and usually free of cost. Peace Village is nearly completely dependent on donations, so this is more than a huge gift. The Non-governmental Organization (NGO) could not exist without clinics, doctors, and nurses who care for the children without being compensated.

This also applies to all the volunteers who support Peace Village by sharing their time, ideas, and energy with the children. So many men and women not only from Germany but from different countries—many from Japan—look after the boys and girls while they are in hospitals, they drive them to doctors, play with them in the Peace Village in Oberhausen, and support the employees with their daily work.

With regard to individual case help, Peace Village International constantly cares for up to 250 to 300 children from an average of eight countries—one half of

A young patient works on a jigsaw puzzle at Peace Village International.

them in hospitals and the other half in Peace Village Oberhausen. At present, there are girls and boys from Angola, The Gambia, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan as well as the Caucasus countries Armenia and Georgia. Most of them are struggling with bone inflammation, the results of severe burns, and urological and orthopedic problems.

HOW NAJIBULLAH BECAME HEALTHY: A PATIENT REPORT

One of the little patients of Peace Village was Najibullah, whose parents and three sisters live in the Afghan province Wardak. He came to Germany at the age of 6 years weighing about 10 lbs. Najibullah suffered from a narrowing of his esophagus and therefore could only eat liquids. He became more and more skinny and only slowly gained height. The German doctors determined that Najibullah was underdeveloped but knew that they would be able to help him. During the following months, they prescribed him hormones and dilated his esophagus several times.

After a few weeks, Najibullah's condition became visibly better. His weight increased and he became livelier. After 6 months he had doubled his weight, although his primary teeth had been pulled because of an infection. That did not keep him from eating potatoes, fish, and salad as fast as the other kids. Besides eating, Najibullah's favorite activity in Peace Village was doing jigsaw puzzles, sometimes with the help of his friend Azamad from Uzbekistan. Every

Volunteers work on a building at Peace Village International.

child in Peace Village is allowed to choose one toy to take home with him or her. It was no surprise that Najibullah chose a jigsaw to put into his bag when the day of departure got closer. Maybe the jigsaw puzzle will help Najibullah to remember his time in Peace Village, where he made friends with children from different countries and cultures. It may also remind him of his time in the hospital, where the doctors helped him free of charge and without asking about his background. The employees of Peace Village hope that when he becomes older, Najibullah will share his memories with other people and convince them that it is possible to live together peacefully. This is the second aspect of individual case help made available through an exchange program.

THE MEANING OF COOPERATION

Another example of individual case help is the story about Mariam from Tajikistan. When she was a child, she came to Germany with the help of Peace Village International and doctors took care of combustion scars on her face and neck. When Mariam returned to Tajikistan, she decided that she wanted to help other children from her country as she had been helped. Today, Mariam works for a local NGO in Kurgan Tjube (Tajikistan) and supports every aid mission of Peace Village. She organizes meetings with families of ill children, tells them about Peace Village's humanitarian aid and—much more important than the facts—she talks about her own experiences in Germany. By doing this, she inspires trust in the families and in the children who have never been in touch with Peace Village before. In fact, Mariam has become a real ambassador for peace.

This example shows the importance of networking and cooperation. Peace Village International

cooperates with different partner organizations not only concerning individual case help but also concerning its various projects, the second important topic of this article. With the help of trustful partners it is much easier to, for example, distribute relief goods in Armenia, Georgia, or Angola. Partners are also necessary to keep the projects running, as there is a rehabilitation program in Armenia and three different projects in Uzbekistan. Children with cleft lip and palate, children with orthopedic problems (eg, club feet) or and those needing plastic surgery can be treated there. Peace Village finances the surgeries, which are done by Uzbek physicians. Since the first project started its work in 2003, more than 3200 children have been treated successfully.

The aim of Peace Village's project work is to build or support systems in the children's home countries to treat as many children as possible in their countries and to fly as few as possible out. A good example is the work that has been done in Vietnam. The project work in Vietnam started in 1973 with the first Peace Village that was built in the Vietnamese city of Da Lat. Another 10 across the country followed. Additionally, 100 health posts, several schools, and a fishing training ship were added. Today, there is no need to fly Vietnamese children out of their country for medical treatment.

The successful concept of health posts has been adapted for neighboring Cambodia since 2002. Today, there are 19 stations and even more are planned. The health posts are built specifically in remote regions to provide the population access to elementary medical treatment (eg, vaccinations, minor operations) and consultation (eg, during pregnancy or for infectious diseases). On average, 15,000 people benefit from these posts.

It all works in cooperation with Peace Village's

A gathering of patients at one of the Peace Village International locations.

Cambodian project partner. He chooses a suitable plot of land in a region where there is no health facility for the people. After that, Peace Village finances the construction of the health posts, which are constructed by Cambodian workers. Once the post is completed, local health authorities assume responsibility for it. Peace Village demands regular project reports and occasionally visits all health posts to check whether the work is being conducted as it should.

Besides the ones described previously, there are other projects such as the “Comped Home” in Cambodia, a school for blind and handicapped children and adolescents and intercultural meetings in the Peace Village Nattandiya in SriLanka and the children’s home “Casa copii” in Romania.

In total, annually around 5 million Euros are provided to support individual case help and all projects. The humanitarian work of Peace Village International is solely financed by donations and just a few membership fees.

EDUCATIONAL PEACE WORK

Last but not least, there is a third important aspect of Peace Village International that needs to be mentioned: the peace educational work, which was written in the statutes at the beginning and implemented by the Peace Village Educational Center since

1986. The state approval followed in 1987.

Peace educational topics and development politics contexts are pointed out in workshops and exhibitions and at events to create social awareness. Children and teenagers gather in Oberhausen at the meeting place to learn about the cultures of the Peace Village-children and to work for a peaceful living.

The Educational Center offers workshops dealing with various topics, eg, country-specific workshops, photography and image editing, parents-children groups, and a peace-power group for teenagers. The participants gather in a meeting place right next to the children’s home in Oberhausen. That way, interactions with the children from Peace Village are convenient, providing an experience that no workshop is able to communicate in theory and that may in addition to individual case help and project aid lead to a day in the future when Peace Village International has become useless and all children will live “happily ever after.” Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go reach this aim.