



CROWN & SHIELD

May 2009

Alum lifts children's spirits

Benilde-St. Margaret's



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on the cover

Bob Hickey Solis ('80) embarked on a 700-mile-walk across South Africa to raise money for Open Arms, an orphanage founded by him and his wife, Sallie. On the 22nd day of his journey, Bob stopped to celebrate with the children. A new Open Arms executive director, Rita Montgomery, had just arrived, and there was cake for everyone!

Alum uses feet to put heart into Open Arms

Twenty-nine days, 700 miles and 1.5 million steps.

These are the statistics that go along with a walk that Bob (Hickey) Solis ('80) completed in August 2008.

In 2004, Bob, his wife, Sallie, and their five children traveled from their home in Arizona, on a mission trip to South Africa to work in an orphanage for a week. Bob explains, "We saw the great devastation that AIDS was causing in the country. We came home and thought about it and prayed about it, and I went back and investigated some more and we just felt called to do something about this problem. Kids have a soft spot in our hearts, so we ended taking a good deal of our life savings in 2005 and buying a farm over there that is now Open Arms Home for Children," an orphanage, founded by Bob and Sallie in 2006. The 70 acres held a house, two cottages, a tennis court and a swimming pool, all atop a beautiful hill in Komga, South Africa. "It's a great place for kids to grow up," says Bob.

Within the first two years, Open Arms had grown to housing 30 children, nurtured by 18 house mothers, three additional staff members and an executive director, originally from Milwaukee. Bob and his family continue to live in Arizona, where Bob maintains a career as a senior vice-president at Morgan Stanley, serving as financial advisor. He makes three to four week-long trips annually to Komga, spending time with the children and checking on his organization. Yet he knows that his talents are best used by being a voice and advocate here in the United

States. "Believe me, I could go and play kickball for days, but it's more important that I stay focused on what my role is, that I'm here being the main cheerleader and fundraiser."

So in 2008, with the orphanage at full capacity, Bob set a goal of raising funds for his beloved facility. To do so, he would walk...and walk...and walk. On foot, he covered 700 miles, journeying west along the southern tip of Africa, from the orphanage in Komga to Cape Town. Explaining the reason for the great distance, Bob says, "In many African cultures, walking a long distance to meet someone is a sign of respect. We decided it would be a symbolic gesture to honor the kids in our care and those we hope would come to our doors in the next couple of years." He adds, "The reason I came up with the walk was to raise awareness, but also funds to build more cottages. The awareness was great, but the money's more important because we'll give kids a home."





Accompanied by Bob and other adults, the children traveled to Wilderness, a small resort town on the Indian Ocean for the best (and only) vacation they have ever had.

Six months prior to the walk, he began touring the U.S., giving presentations and raising funds for the walk. Then, on August 1, off he went, accompanied by two hired men (one, a marathon runner, who walked with him, and another who drove a support truck behind). “It was a big adjustment mentally,” admits Bob, used to a busy lifestyle. They used no iPods; “It was just get up and walk.”

Considering the high crime rate in the area, they trekked only during the day, and spent their nights either at the homes of fellow Rotarians or at Bed and Breakfasts. Their route was along a two-lane road with little shoulder—the busiest national highway there. Despite some interesting encounters with wild animals, including hippos, baboons, giraffes and wildebeests, Bob states that they never felt threatened by either wildlife or humans, but that the biggest danger was the 70-mile-per-hour traffic whizzing by. Bob completed the walk in half of the expected time and collected \$250,000 for Open Arms. Now with blisters healed, he is proud to say that the funds are enough to build six more cottages. Each will hold 8-10 kids, along with a housemother. Three cottages, which will immediately double the capacity, are on track to open soon, and three more will be constructed later this year, to bring the total capacity to about 80 kids. Proportional staff and resources will be added, as Bob stresses, “We want to ensure a quality experience and not just be a warehouse for children.”

Currently, the children at Open Arms range in age from 3 months to 11 years, most being under age 5. Some came to the orphanage directly from birth in the hospital and some were abandoned in the city or have been referred through the court system by other means. Bob says, “Our board has decided not to adopt children out,” and explains that the U.S. has no adoption contact with South Africa. “We could adopt them to Europe, but we’ve decided we want these children to be the next generation of leaders in their community.”

Plus, due to a local unemployment rate of about 50%, Open Arms has provided an “unexpected blessing” of giving people jobs. “Most of the house mothers are the sole bread winners in their household,” says Bob.

Bob and Sallie hold this cause especially dear, as they have opened their own home to children in need. Thirteen years ago, they gained custody of two at-risk children (one of whom was on a team that Bob was coaching), expanding their family. They now parent two 20-year-olds, one 22-year-old and two 23-year-olds...and survived the recent teenage years.

Setting a good pace with other organizations too, Bob organizes an annual charity golf tournament in the Virgin Islands, where he and Sallie worked for a few years at a home for children years ago. But his plans for Open Arms continue to grow. His next step, once the cottages are built, will be to establish satellite facilities in smaller towns near Komga. Supported entirely by donations, Open Arms records an annual operating budget of \$210,000. “I’m sure people regret being on our Christmas card list,” jokes Bob. However, he admits, “It has been incredibly humbling to see the generosity of people to help kids they’ll probably never meet.”

He credits BSM for his own motivation. “I don’t think this project would have ever gotten off the ground if I hadn’t had the experiences that I had [at BSM]. I know the seeds were planted at BSM, with Mike Jeremiah’s social justice class and watching Father Arnold Weber do the work of 100 men, and seeing the teachers work for lesser pay but with dedication they brought to the job...not to mention the quality of education.” Bob played baseball, football and basketball while in high school, and went on to play baseball and study theology at Notre Dame. “I’ll be a Red Knight forever,” he says, but thanks to him, children across the globe will be part of a family forever.