

MEMPHIS DOWNTOWNER

The Orphanos Foundation

by Mark Ali and Terre Gorham

A passion for God, children, and life on Earth led to an organization founded on the principles of give, go, and pray, a foundation that loves children face to face.

It's natural for people to feel shrunken by the vastness of the world, to consider themselves too inconsequential to make any sort of real difference in someone's life or change it in any real way. But for those who understand that children don't need to see magic in order to feel special, and that every child just wants someone to spend time with and love them, those people have the means to make big differences in the smallest of ways. Building relationships with children in need can make those children understand that their lives are important, worthwhile, and loved. Even if they are orphans.

That is part of the multi-faceted mission that Orphanos Foundation was founded upon and operates with today. The foundation's name comes from the Greek word orphan, and its chairman of the board is Jesus Christ.

"This organization was born out of a number of passions of mine," says missionary Wayne Sneed, CEO/President and co-founder of the foundation. "One is my relationship with God, another is my love for children — especially children at risk — and another is my passion for the world and connecting with people. I love God and I love kids, so it was born out of that."

This Memphis-operated organization provides relief and support to orphanages throughout the world. It started in 1997, inspired by Sneed's work with another local mission agency, where he led church-based missions to Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean. His job was to train the missionaries in what to expect culturally, logistically, and biblically.



Orphanos co-founder Wayne Sneed plays with two orphans in South Korea.

Halfway through Sneed's six years with the other mission organization, the president asked him to take over a child sponsorship program with the promise that if Sneed could turn it into a self-funded operation, it would be Sneed's to run. Six months later, Sneed had it paying for itself.

Instead of leading crusades for God around the world, Sneed was now leading short-term mission teams to orphanages around the globe, merging his passion for God, mission work, and children, and unknowingly paving the way to the creation of Orphanos.

"Our passion at Orphanos is that we exist because God created us for a purpose, and that purpose involves us knowing Him personally," says Sneed, the only cofounder still with the foundation, although the other four remain active participants. "Our objective is to get to the kids of the world and give them the opportunity to know their Creator, know that He does care about them, and that we give credit to Him. That is our passion, but we do it through kids. We could be a church, a homeless mission, or a lot of different things, but we chose this path."

Also, engaging in these short-term missions gives people the opportunity to do something with their lives that matters. "I feel strongly that those disadvantaged and abused children who are defenseless, have no voice, and no one to stand up for them, have a special place in the heart of God. And I know people want to be involved in something bigger than themselves. They want to know that their life had an impact."

Although mission teams do conduct work projects at orphanages, such as remodeling a kitchen or painting a room, the primary reasons for the visits are to be with the children and build relationships. It's people, says Sneed, who change people.

"I remember Nestor, a little boy in a home in Guatemala," Sneed recalls. "It was Visitation Day, and no one had come to see him. I found him crouched behind the door crying. I just happened to be there at the right time to sit down, talk to him, and ask him to play soccer — let him know he wasn't alone."

"Stephanie, a street girl in Romania," Sneed continues. "She took me into the underground world of Bucharest and showed me where she lived — literally in the sewer systems. I remember kids in Albania, the abuses and inhumanity. Galmar, the boy in Nicaragua who had grown up in a chicken coop and thought he was a chicken. Just seeing the emptiness in their faces. I know that we touch a deep part of their core being just by encouraging them, strengthening them, validating their existence."

Although the foundation's main mission is making human connection with children, it was built on three principles: give, go, and pray. "We give to help the kids, we go visit the kids, and we pray for the kids," says Sneed.



The primary reasons for orphanage visits are to build relationships and make a human connection with the children. Team missionary David Mann makes a playful, sandy connection with orphans in Brazil.

GIVE

The give principle means giving materially to the child. This is handled through sponsorships and grants. The foundation currently partners with three orphanages in Brazil, South Korea, and Colombia, through which the child sponsorship program is coordinated. The homes Orphanos partners with can change based on need.

Children in the three homes can be individually sponsored, selected from a photo album of faces in need. "We don't expect too much from the donors or the kids," Sneed says. "The donor receives the child's name, birthday, and a biography. The child is given the name of his sponsor. The two can write back and forth, but most important is that the child knows there is someone out there who knows he exists and cares about him."

Money raised through child sponsorship is not given to a specific child, but used to fund and support the entire home and all its children — unless the sponsor sends a specific donation to their child as a birthday gift or for other special occasions.

On the other side of the giving principle are grants. Orphanos currently partners with 13 orphanages around the world. All are eligible to receive grants, so if one needs money to fix a water heater, Orphanos takes on the responsibility of raising funds for that one-time project. One hundred percent of all funds raised are passed on to the partner home, which is unusual. Most nonprofits take a percentage to cover their own overhead expenses.

GO

The go principle offers four opportunities through which individuals can physically visit the children. Orphanos conducts two-week, two-month, two-year, and career mission groups. When the mission teams head out, they go with the mindset of building relationships with the kids.

"Kids don't need us to build them a nice building: they need us to tell them that we love them, that their life matters, and that God does not like what has happened to them," says Sneed. "Kids believe what they are told. Our objective is to be with them and relate to them. And an interesting thing we found is that the more we gear our groups to build relationships, the more it changes the lives of the people who go, as well."

Grace Fragoso's passion is watching just those types of miracles occur. She grew up in an orphanage in Brazil because her mother and father ran it. She now works as Orphanos's global ambassador and emotional temperature gauge, traveling tirelessly, carrying its message and mission with her.

"I remember one girl we got involved with in Brazil," Fragoso recalls. "She was nine years old, and her name was Priscila Brito. She told me that the last words her biological father said to her were that she would never amount to anything. Then we came into her life, realized her potential, and helped her get a sponsor to go to school. She has since graduated college with a degree in communications, and she is now working and helping at the home she grew up in."

Ultimately, however, Sneed understands that no matter how much everyone wants to help children and no matter how much it hurts to see them in pain, there's only so much the foundation can do. So the third and final principal in the structure of Orphanos is praying for change.

PRAY

Sneed, his staff, board of directors, sponsors, and mission team members pray constantly to the only one who can ultimately provide the cataclysmic change these kids need: God.

"All right, so we go do all of this," says Sneed. "We go to visit with a view to change, a view of how can we help, and then we pray for change. Ultimately, there is only a minimum amount of things we can do in the giving and the going. I'm one little man in one tiny city in some country called North America, and there are 6.7 billion people on the planet Earth. So let's be talking to the Creator because he likes to do things after we ask him. So prayer matters because sometimes he waits for us to ask before he answers."

The biggest upshot of Orphanos Foundation is that lives are changing because of the work it does. Kids are nurtured, encouraged, fed, and cared for — and people return from missions with a grander vision of the world and who they are in it. "The bottom line," says Sneed, "is that we are doing God's work and giving credit to Him."

Orphanos Foundation, 458-9500, orphanos.org



Team missionary Carrie Buhler shares a laugh-and bonding time-with an orphan in Brazil.



I remember when I first began working here, standing in the middle of the office with tears in my eyes and just praying for anything but this because this is so hard. It's hard because we see a lot of difficult situations with children. But I feel this is a sacrifice I give to God in allowing my heart to be broken over and over again for His benefit and for the benefit of the children. *Sandi Langley summer internship director, Orphanos Foundation*