

JUNE 2007

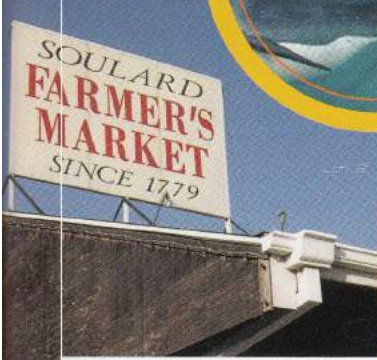
\$5

ST. LOUIS COMMERCE

MAGAZINE



101 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ST. LOUIS



Charity Starts at Home

St. Louis-based Wings of Hope provides miracles worldwide

By Jim Nicholson

Imagine your child has a life-threatening deformity. No, deformity is too simple. Make that deformities, decidedly in the plural, and that her life, per se, has been reduced to existence in a wheelchair, but not a normal wheelchair, a horizontal wheelchair. How does one care for a child in a horizontal wheelchair? Well, for starters, it's a 24/7 job, which means, as a single mother, you have no other job. Your income equates to welfare,

which certainly does not begin to compensate you for the hours you put in. Your medical bills are more than stratospheric and, because you have no medical insurance as you can neither afford it and, even if you could, no insurance company would grant it, you're reduced to the waits beyond belief of Emergency Room treatment. Your child, who could and should be a happy, pretty girl, is friendless, in constant pain and, well, even

good girls act up after a few hours of staring at an Emergency Room ceiling.

Or imagine you're the Chief of a tribe of Indians deep in the heart of the Amazon. 'Civilization' has long ago wiped out your own civilization and continues to encroach upon your hunting and farming lands. Your tribe has retreated into the jungle and themselves about as far as they can go and the push of contemporary life has met the shove



Wings of Hope Executive Director Douglas Clements

STEPHEN DOLAN

of life, as you've always known it. The entire tribe is in desperate need of some form of miracle merely to maintain its existence, but what? Some tribal visionary—a young man who should be a hunter? An old woman who's seen it all? Anyway, someone who's capable of verbalizing thoughts new to the tribe has noted that the tribe has always known how to make brooms and, for all they know, they make the best brooms

list could go on as this is obviously an organization that facilitates between need and opportunity rather than one that makes promises it cannot keep or, possibly worse, expects the vagaries of life across the planet to conform to some kind of institutional rule book.

In referring to the Amazonians, Clements points out that the "mental evolution" inherent in making the decision to control their future through the

services the medical community gives to Wings of Hope patients. Sometimes, those patients provide both the organization and the medical community with truly memorable challenges.

An international case in point is the story of a 10-year-old Somali girl who had been abducted as a sex slave. After three years of captivity and more sexual abuse than one cares to contemplate, she was rendered useless to her captors



in the Amazon. But how does knowing how to make brooms equate to making brooms for a living? How does the tribe market its brooms and, in essence, embrace a broom-based capitalism?

Both stories are true and Wings of Hope, the St. Louis-based volunteer charity provided the miracles necessary to give each a truly happy ending. The little girl was flown from her home to a hospital, which provided the series of operations she needed, but her mother could not afford—all arranged for by the Wings of Hope Medical Relief and Air Transport (MAT). Instead of being confined to that prison of a horizontal wheelchair, she's now on her feet and playing. The Amazonians, meanwhile, have been given that facilitating step they needed towards self-sufficiency. Welcome to just another day at the Wings of Hope office.

Executive Director Douglas Clements, explains that "Wings of Hope sees itself as delivering humanity" then clarifies the phrase by saying Wings of Hope "delivers hope by providing healthcare, access to healthcare, education, opportunities for education, business opportunities and micro-loan programs." The

making of brooms was "phenomenal." If brooms, why not another product? Or two? If Wings of Hope enables them to run a business, they will, inevitably, take that knowledge and progress to another level.

Wings of Hope, Clements adds, provides a means of solving one of the greater conundrums of contemporary American medicine. "If you're poor and if your disease is not treated locally," he explains, "your insurance will not pay for treatment elsewhere. If that treatment is needed to save your life and, by circumstance, unavailable, Wings of Hope with the MAT will step in and take you where you can receive treatment." In human terms, that means the charity will find a medical center and team willing to provide treatment, fly the patient to that center to receive treatment and provide an on-site volunteer to monitor that patient as would a family member or friend. "We flew 592 people last year," Clements relates, "and not a one died."

Needless to say, the organization has ties to hospitals and doctors across the country and deep respect for the medical community, which is reflected in the

("she was so deformed, she no longer had bodily functions," Clements relates) and abandoned to die. Instead, she was found by a caravan and, ultimately, returned to her parents. Wings of Hope was contacted. "She needed all of her lower abdomen and her gynecological equipment rebuilt. As she had no passport, getting her here was a huge problem. Colin Powell (a member of Wings of Hope's Honorary Council) stepped in and got her a parole visa. We flew her over in one of our airplanes." The Mayo Clinic provided what turned out to be two years of treatment.

Clements believes "charities should prove they deserve to receive money". With Wings of Hope, the proof stretches across the planet. Discussions are in process to ensure the success stories continue. "Negotiations are underway with a major St. Louis corporation for them to fund the Saint Louis Medical Relief and Air Transport service in a manner that requires them to spend zero initial capital," Clements offers. "Wings would be required to validate our worth each year and we welcome that opportunity." What a nice way to deliver humanity. ■