

EAST OREGONIAN

LIFESTYLES

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Photo courtesy of His Little Feet

Singers in the His Little Feet Orphan Choir run across a field in Colorado, where the organization is based.

little feet, BIG SMILES

Orphans sing out despite pain in lives

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

The children in the His Little Feet International Children's Choir have every right to have a sour view of the world.

Some of the orphaned singers come from war zones. Parents have died, gotten sick or simply lack the money needed to care for their offspring. Some were abandoned.

Yet, they smile.

"These kids have so much to complain about, yet there is so much joy inside them," said Mike Hahn, who co-founded the choir in 2009 with his wife, Christa.

The choir will perform five times in Umatilla County in the next week.

The sheer number of orphans in the world bothered the couple, some 143 million at the time. The Hahns saw numerous orphans during travels to Nepal, Ethiopia, Uganda, the Philippines, Honduras, Mexico, Haiti and India.

One thing he saw in Haiti still haunts Mike. A young Haitian father, who had struggled to care for his baby daughter after losing his wife, couldn't feed her on earnings of about one U.S. dollar a day. He finally brought her to an orphanage where the Hahns were working. She was sick and severely dehydrated. Missionaries at the orphanage quickly took the baby from his arms and hurried to revive her. It was too late.

"I saw the father get the news that she was gone," Hahn said. "I've never seen anyone cry or mourn like that."

The memory of the 340 children living at

another orphanage in India, however, makes him smile. The children queued up into two lines and greeted the Hahns. Some held up signs of welcome. Then, wearing joyful smiles, they sang.

"They sang their little hearts out," Hahn said. "It seemed like the happiest place on earth."

The Hahns decided to start a traveling choir comprised of orphans to tour the U.S. The mission was to create a Christian organization "to help, love and train vulnerable orphan children" and to put the plight of orphans front and center. The group also collaborates with groups such as Compassion International, America World Adoption and Visiting Orphans to aid orphaned and disadvantaged children around the world.

"According to UNICEF, there are now 153 million orphans in the world," Hahn said. "That number is just staggering."

In 2010, the first choir featured children from Haiti. This year, the 16 singers hail from Ethiopia and India, with one Haitian. The singers range in age from 6 to 13.

The children usually don't know much English when they arrive. At His Little Feet's headquarters in Windsor, Colorado, the singers study the language and learn performing arts. They also study academics and life skills. Crista directs the choir with the assistance of translators. Often, Mike said, she uses charades-like sign language to communicate at first.

The children aren't selected because of their musical ability. There are no American Idol-es-



Photo courtesy of His Little Feet

Singers in the His Little Feet Orphan Choir incorporate percussion instruments into their performances.



Photo courtesy of His Little Feet

Singers from the His Little Feet Orphan Choir rehearse for their tour.

que tryouts. His Little Feet staff work with orphanages to find children who like to sing, can easily adapt to change and are excited to travel.

At first, there is some stage fright. "During the first couple performances, they are a little nervous, but it doesn't really show," Hahn said. "They sing out."

The children often play instruments from their country during performances. Concerts include songs in English and the singers' native tongues, a "gospel-centric message" and "powerful testimonies from the children's life experiences." Choir members stay with local families during their tour.

Hahn said seeing and meeting older orphans helps people change their idea of adoption.

"A lot of the time, people want to adopt babies, not kids in the 6-13 age range," Hahn said. "These are the kids who are forgotten."

Horizons are broadened during the 10 months in the U.S.

Ten-year-old Kima of India emailed that "I get to sing for Jesus, study in English, see big mountains and touch the ocean waves." Ethiopian singer Helen, 12, cherishes the opportunity to "sing with my friends from other countries

and traveling on the bus to many new places."

The choir travels to 25 states, performing concerts in such places as New York, Kentucky, Nebraska and North Dakota.

At concerts, Hahn often gets inquiries about adopting the choir members. The singers are unavailable for adoption while in the United States per agreement with the children's home countries.

The children arrive in Colorado in November and return home in August. Hahn said it is hard to watch the children say farewell to each other after so many months of bonding.

"It's brutal," Hahn said. "There's not a dry eye."

The choir will perform this Sunday at 9 and 10:45 a.m. at New Hope Community Church in Hermiston and 6 p.m. at Hermiston High School. The choir will appear Feb. 11 in Pendleton at 7 p.m. at the Living Word Christian Center, and twice on Feb. 15, in Ione (10 a.m. at the Ione Community School) and 6 p.m. in Heppner (St. Patrick's Catholic Church Fellowship Hall).

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Photo courtesy of His Little Feet

Singers in the His Little Feet Orphan Choir came this year from India, Ethiopia and Haiti and range in age from six to 13.