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The Haiti Orphan Project

The good people at Kirkwood-based Keane Insurance are committed to improving lives in Haiti

by Jennifer Grotpeter

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When a catastrophic earthquake struck Haiti in 2010, Webster Groves High School alum John Keane found himself in a unique position to help.

As founder of Keane Insurance Group, Inc. in Kirkwood, which specializes in medical malpractice insurance, Keane had access to a broad network of health care providers. That network made HOPE – the Haiti Orphan Project – possible.

When the earth-quake hit Haiti, Keane's business already had a nonprofit called the Keane Charitable Group, which hosted a golf tournament to benefit various local charities. After the earthquake, Keane Insurance Group decided to partner with SSM Health Care to offer aid in Haiti.

"We already had a relationship with them (SSM), and they were already working in Haiti," Keane said. "They were putting together doctors to send, so we teamed up and put the dollars together, and they went."

Keane and his employees wanted to do more, but couldn't find the right fit until he and Les E. Prouty, his employee and former pastor, met with the Global Orphan Project in Kansas City. Keane was impressed with what the organization was doing for Haiti's significant orphan population before the earthquake, and how it was adapting to the increased number of children orphaned by the earthquake.

In April of 2010, Keane and Prouty spent five days in Haiti, awestruck by the destruction and the orphanages that were overflowing with newly parentless children.

"It was a life-changing experience – you will never think the same way again," Keane said.

Keane and Prouty spent the next year rebranding the Keane Charitable Group and developing relationships in Haiti, and HOPE – the Haiti Orphan Project – was born.

Like any neonate, HOPE started small, grew, and learned from experience. Village de Vie in Gonaives, Haiti,



John Keane, president of the Keane Insurance Group and founder of the Haiti Orphan Project. photo courtesy the Haiti Orphan Project



Les Prouty, executive director of the Haiti Orphan Project, pictured with his wife, Helen, and children from the village of de Vie. **photo courtesy the Haiti Orphan Project**

opened in 2012, providing children with housing, food, clothing, education and clean water. Later that same year, HOPE tapped into its medical connections and started mobile medical clinics.

"The mobile clinics are taking doctors and nurses to Haiti, moving around to remote areas and providing basic medical care," Keane said. "They see a lot of stomach problems, skin and scalp issues, infections, lower leg and feet issues. Dentists and oral surgeons come and the dentist pulls teeth all day because there are so many infected teeth."

Oftentimes, it's the first medical or dental care the people have received.

"We see 8- to 10-year-old children who have never been to a doctor before," said Prouty, who now serves as the executive director of HOPE.

A Growing Mission

HOPE has grown from an organization that was founded to help deal with a natural disaster to one with a well thought out, long-term vision.

Keane and Prouty realized many of the young children weren't orphans by the conventional definition, but were "economic orphans." Those children had family members – maybe even parents – outside Village de Vie, but in a country with no public education system and no real economy, their families thought the children would be better off in an orphanage. At least there the children would eat, go to school and maybe see a doctor.

HOPE has now expanded its programs to focus on health care, jobs and education for the broader community. Keane used the story of one mother to illustrate HOPE's broadened mission.

"A couple of years ago, a woman who lived in the slums outside our orphanage brought her young son in," he explained. "There's no electricity and most cooking is done in large open pots of water or oil. The boy fell into the cooking pot and it spilled down his backside and one leg. The burn should have put him in a hospital for a long time, but we did what we could and gave his mother, who lived in impossible conditions, materials to keep the wound clean.

"The doctor was not hopeful for his survival, but three months later his mother brought him back – a miracle," Keane said.

The boy's mother had done such a remarkable job taking care of her son's wound that she had become a bit of a burn specialist in her neighborhood, Keane continued. HOPE gave her additional burn supplies, and she soon started a business.

HOPE eventually enrolled the woman's family, and four others, in a pilot program aimed at preventing children from being orphaned. The program currently keeps 20 children with their families, providing education and health care for them, and creating jobs to employ the adults.

Help Make A Difference

There are many ways to contribute to the mission of HOPE. The adventurous can join one of the trips to Haiti – no medical or nursing degree is required.

HOPE also accepts donations through its website, and has three annual fundraising events – a golf

tournament in June, a 5K run in the fall, and in the summer, the organization hosts one of the Kirkwood Concert Series nights.

Justin Donathan, volunteer coordinator for the recent 5K, noted that Kirkwood businesses have been exceptionally generous with their support, providing in-kind donations, prizes for runners and cash donations. The Keane Insurance Group turns its parking lot into a festival with popcorn, face painting and booths from the sponsors.

"The 5K run made upwards of \$15,000, with about 300 runners," Donathan said. "We welcome serious runners, but are open to anyone who wants to walk or jog. Next year we plan to add a fun run for kids."

For additional information about HOPE or how to get involved with the project, visit haitiorphanproject.org.