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Virtual Adoption Reaches Across the World



By CULLEN DIRNER
Feb. 13, 2007

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You may not be ready to adopt a child from a Third World country like Angelina or Madonna, but a new organization can connect you to such an orphan, at least through the Internet.

Thanks to the growing use of Internet video conferencing technology, a U.S.-based charity is connecting families with orphans on opposite sides of the planet.

It's the brainchild of parent Amy Stokes from New York, who got the idea after adopting her son Calder -- now 4 years old -- from an orphanage or "group home" in South Africa. Ever since, Stokes has donated her time to orphaned children.

The AIDS pandemic in Africa has left more than 12 million children without parents. According to a report released in 2004 by UNICEF and other U.N. agencies, by the year 2010 there will be 50 million orphaned children in sub-Saharan Africa, although not all will be orphaned as a result of AIDS. Stokes says, whatever the cause may be, these children are severely lacking adult attention and guidance.

"The tangible lack of adults in the lives of these children was just palpable," Stokes says.

So two years ago, Stokes, 40, started Infinite Family, a charity that combines financial sponsorship with a requirement for each donor to spend one hour a week online talking with an orphaned "net buddy."

"It is the visual and emotional bond that comes from talking to people face to face that can be a positive influence in their lives," Stokes says.

Today Infinite Family has grown to over 40 "net families," Stokes says. While the organization is looking to expand, it is currently limited to a few orphanages and schools outside of Johannesburg, South Africa, where Infinite Family supplies the equipment and technology necessary to make the connection happen. Stokes hopes by 2008 the organization will be able to expand throughout South Africa into neighboring countries.

Each sponsor for Infinite Family must submit to a background screening, technological tutorials and cultural seminars before they are ready to log on.

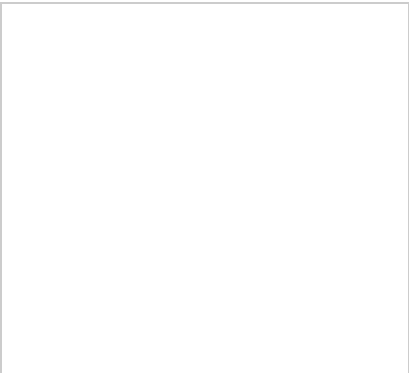
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Elizabeth DeVito found out about Infinite Family from friends and now pays \$40 a month to be a sponsor. The New York resident finds it a manageable and meaningful way to give her time to charity.

"You're doing it every week, and you look forward to it," says DeVito, who logs on every Wednesday to chat with her net buddy, a young-adult orphan named Christine.

Twenty-one-year-old Christine, one of the older orphans at Nkosi's Haven orphanage in South Africa, has weekly scheduled video conferences along with three other children at a time.

In the beginning, DeVito found that Christine's emotional state combined with minor technical glitches made for a slow start.

"I am not saying it is instant because these kids have been through a lot," she says.

Ultimately, however, DeVito says the connection works because "each person has agreed to the relationship. You come into it wanting to open up to each other."

Stokes says the virtual connections are getting results.

"[The orphans] show up on time and they are respecting other people. They are learning new conflict-resolution skills," she says. Stokes attributes the change in behavior to having an "adult in their lives that they can talk to about personal and private issues."

Child psychologist Yvonne Keairns is a consultant to Infinite Family. She says the interaction is a positive influence in the children's lives.

"I think the children are finding it a fresh and delightful connection," she says.

Keairns says these connections also expose the orphans to technology that the rest of the world has already embraced.

"To deprive these kinds of networks would be just another form of deprivation," she says.

Mike Kiernan from Save the Children says their sponsorship organization has not yet explored the concept and benefit of video conferencing technology in these children's lives.

"Any way that you can connect an individual with the needs of a child overseas so that they can understand those needs, that is great" says Kiernan.

DeVito says the time these virtual families spend together is something that the children have come to depend on.

"I think we have a lot of trust now," she says of her new relationship with Christine. "She knows I am going to be there every Wednesday."

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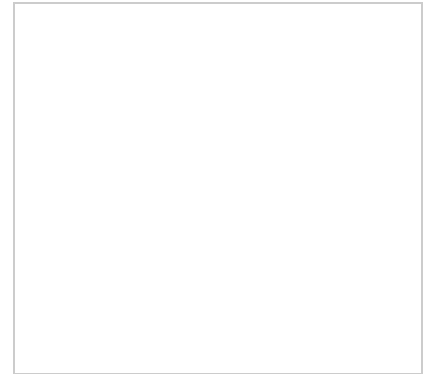
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