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Non-Profit Founded by UCSB Faculty Members Brings Relief to Refugees in Chad

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, exhorted anthropologist Margaret Mead. "Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Were Mead alive today, she might be referring to the Chad Relief Foundation (CRF), a non-profit organization with roots in UC Santa Barbara's Masters in Global and International Studies (MGIS) program, and founded by UCSB faculty member Richard Appelbaum and former faculty member William Felstiner. Over the last five years, CRF has completed 15 projects in south Chad, totaling nearly \$500,000, and improving the lives of tens of thousand of refugees who have crossed the borders from the war-torn Central African Republic.

The organization's first project provided tricycle wheelchairs to approximately 60 people -- refugees in the southern camps as well as individuals in the surrounding villages -- all of whom suffered paralyzed or missing legs, and could do no more than crawl to get around. Other projects have focused on border structures, secondary schools, medicines and nutritional supplements, protection of women and children, education programs, ball fields and sports equipment, oxen and plow units, mosquito nets, and solar powered lighting and refrigeration in rural health centers.

The organization was born out of a conference co-sponsored by the (MGIS) program. "The first cohort of students in the program has just come back from their internships," said Appelbaum, who holds the MacArthur Chair in Sociology and Global & International Studies, and is the founder and former director of the graduate program in global studies. "Three of us -- Bill, Stan Roden, who was, at the time, head of the local committee of Human Rights Watch, and myself -- got together after the conference and decided we wanted to do something in Chad."

Felstiner, a specialist in the sociology of law who taught in the sociology and law and society departments at UCSB, took his first trip to Chad in 2007. He and a few CRF board members visited Goré, a small town in southwest Chad. "There were three refugee camps outside of Goré, and it was also the headquarters for all United Nations operations in south Chad," he recalled. "We visited the camps, talked with people who run the NGO's there, and talked with people from the U.N. When we came back to the U.S., we developed one small project and completed it very quickly."

Since then, Felstiner, president of CRF, has made seven additional trips to Chad, each time meeting with people and organizations operating in the area and hearing their wish lists. "We come back here, sit down with the board, and figure out which are the highest priority," Felstiner said. "Normally, we don't try to raise funds for a specific project. We raise funds for our program, and then allocate money to projects."

Much of CRF's success can be attributed to the partnerships the board of directors has formed with other Santa Barbara-based non-profit organizations, including Unite to Light, Vitamin Angels, and Direct Relief International.

Unite to Light, which had its start in UCSB's Center for Energy Efficiency, distributes high-efficiency solar-powered LED lamps to schoolchildren in developing countries around the world. Recently, they dispatched 300 units to Chad, at the behest of CRF. "There's no electricity in some of the camps, no light, and a lot of vulnerable individuals," said Felstiner. "Someone in Chad said they needed 300 solar flashlights, at cost of \$17,000." Appelbaum got in touch with John Bowers, director of the Institute for Energy Efficiency and founder of Unite to Light, and 10 days later, 300 lamps touched down in Chad. CRF is paying the shipping costs and the U.N. is overseeing distribution.

CRF works with Vitamin Angels and Direct Relief International in much the same way. Those organizations provide the products, and CRF provides the distribution channels. In the case of Vitamin Angels, which supplies vitamins and other micronutrients to developing countries around the world, CRF is responsible only for the distribution costs, which, according to Felstiner, are minimal.

CRF has paid shipping costs for inventory provided by Direct Relief International, but, as Felstiner said, it's worth every penny. "It's not cheap -- it might cost us \$2,000," he said, "but you can send 25,000 doses of antibiotics, and that can save a lot of lives."

"The list of projects that CRF has completed really is remarkable," said Appelbaum. "The benefits are enormous. And it shows that a small group of people actually can have an impact. That isn't limited to something like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation."

Other board members associated with UCSB include Erika Felix, assistant researcher in the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education; William Murdoch, professor emeritus in the Department of Ecology, Evolution, and Marine Biology; and Bob Bason, former assistant chancellor of UCSB, who serves as a director emeritus. In addition, the UCSB chapter of Engineers Without Borders has provided guidance to CRF on technical matters.

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