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Shaking Things Up

by Lauri Dodd

By offering a daily supplement to children near and far, the Reliv Kalogris Foundation is on a mission to ‘Nourish the World,’ in body, mind and spirit.

As she embarked on her latest journey, Nicole Johnson* realized she had no idea what she could expect from this trip. She fidgeted slightly in her cushy airline seat as she contemplated what was ahead. In her mind, she solemnly reviewed the pictures she had seen of the children she was going to encounter soon—their shy smiles and haunting faces seared into her mind.

At this point, her career spanned two decades with Reliv International, and this was her 90th all-expenses-paid trip with the company. The funny thing is that Nicole looked forward to this excursion more than she had any of the others. Somehow she just knew that this one would be different. At the time, she had no way of knowing how right she would be.

Looking In

The specifics of Johnson’s trip are somewhat surprising. The minute she heard about the promotion, she looked at her fiancé and vowed to win this trip—no matter what. Ever since she had heard about the so-called “garbage-dump children,” they had held a special place in her heart. And she wanted to do her part to help improve their plight.

An outsider looking in on the announcement of this particular volume promotion would have been intrigued, at the very least. Arguably, it allows us a glimpse into the soul of Reliv.

*(Name has been changed.)

On the surface, the concept is really nothing new. After all, most direct selling companies do, in fact, sponsor promotions with lavish prizes, such as trips to exotic locales, in an effort to incentivize their distributors to perform and boost business growth. Even the destinations—Malaysia, the Philippines—may not have raised an eyebrow, although decidedly Haiti may have made some curious, after an earthquake wreaked havoc on the area earlier this year.

The trip was part of an effort to increase awareness of Reliv’s charitable endeavors, and to grow the philanthropic Reliv Kalogris Foundation from a grass-roots level. “We wanted more people to be able to see and experience firsthand the work we are doing to help feed people around the world,” says Scott Montgomery, Reliv Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer, and Chairman of the Reliv Kalogris Foundation. “And what has happened is that people have become almost like ambassadors, talking about their trip and spreading that positive message to others as well.”

It seems to say something about a company that hosts a promotion for their distributors where the top producers receive an all-expenses-paid trip to help with mission work in the Philippines, Malaysia and Haiti, some of the poorest parts of the world.

One Step Forward

This massive effort to make a difference on a grand scale all started with the relatively small request by one couple that had a desire to make life better for children around the world.

“A couple of distributors from Australia came to us and told us they had a few areas where they wanted to ship product, and we said, ‘Sure!’” Montgomery says. “They had a passion for helping the children who lived in the garbage dumps in the Philippines, and that began our long history of reaching out to that segment of the world.”

Today, as the driving force behind Reliv’s fourth pillar, the Kalogris Foundation’s mission is to “nourish our world” by providing nutritional supplements to support needy individuals and organizations. “We currently have more than 270 feeding programs in 10 countries, but our goal is to expand that to have 370 or 500—as many programs as it takes to address the need,” says Reliv Vice President of Corporate Communications Barry Murov. “We want to continue to grow this foundation to help as many people as possible.”

Although a simple request 15 years ago started the Kalogris Foundation, named on behalf of Dr. Ted Kalogris, the creator of Reliv’s first product, only in the past five years or so has the foundation really started mushrooming. “We are not content to stay *status quo* with the 3,000 donors who currently contribute to the Kalogris Foundation,” Montgomery says. “We want to increase that number to 4,000 or more, and we are very determined to make that happen.”

The Ripple Effect

It may seem eye-rubbingly strange to see small children running and playing in and around actual piles of refuse in a garbage dump. In all actuality, though, it is probably something most people wish they would never have to see. But these children grow up here and

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eke out an existence by helping their parents scavenge—mining the dump for scraps of aluminum, copper and other metals that can bring much-needed money to their families. In fact, whole communities have developed, so to speak, in these areas.

To help organize and facilitate the distribution of food to nearly 43,000 people every day, Reliv employs area coordinators at each site. These are people local to the community who not only speak the language, but are also instrumental in importing the food and making sure it gets to the people who need it the most.

“It is important for us to distinguish ourselves from the many relief organizations out there,” Murov says. “Those groups do wonderful work, but what we do is vastly different. We are not there for a few weeks to help pick up the pieces after a disaster. We are there in the community for the long term, making a difference in the residents’ lives day in and day out.”

In many areas, the impact made by Reliv is measurable; in other places, the effects are more subtle, but ever-present, nonetheless. In Sri Lanka, for example, some see a destination city, a resort locale fueled by beauty and tourism. Others see a hidden side not advertised to the masses that is home to upward of 6,000 previously hungry children, now fueled by Reliv shakes.

“We feed the children a 4- to 6-ounce chocolate shake of our Reliv Now for Kids product,” Montgomery says. “It is extremely gratifying to see that children who were once starving and suffering from malnutrition are now healthy and happy because they are getting the proper nutrition they need every day.”

As a part of their international conference every year, Reliv sponsors the Mission Walk to increase awareness and raise funds to support the work of the Kalogris Foundation at home and abroad. Funds raised from this event go primarily toward keeping the brick-and-mortar buildings in the impoverished areas fully functional.

The edifices are used, first and foremost, as a place for the children to go and receive their Reliv shakes every day. But the buildings have transformed the communities on another level as well. “The feeding centers have also come to be used as schools and for child care, community events and church services,” Montgomery says. “People congregate at these buildings for a variety of reasons, and they have served as a way to bring consistency in the children’s lives and have helped build a level of trust that people there have for our organization.”

To see the before and after photos is at once disturbing and heartwarming. A child who was gaunt and emotionless is replaced by the same little person—now round-faced and smiling. “Without a doubt, the trip was a life-changing experience,” Johnson says. “To us, a Reliv shake is a supplement, but to these children, it’s life, and very often the only nutrition they get. I have always had the motto that I ‘live to give,’ and this trip allowed me to take my motto to a whole-new level.

I am so proud to be a part of a company that has such a huge heart for helping people.”

After a decade and a half, the Kalogris Foundation’s story has come full circle in some respects. There are some children in the remotest areas of the world who have grown up with Reliv and who now reach out to help others and pay it forward, if you will. “Many times we have moms showing up on our doorsteps of the feeding centers because they know we will help feed their children and keep them healthy,” Montgomery says. “Then we get letters, thanking us for saving their children. Those are the stories that keep us going every day.”

It is not why they do this, by any means, but an added benefit is that people everywhere are taking notice of the group’s philanthropic efforts. “Some people have even joined our company because of the work we are doing with the foundation,” Montgomery says. “The bonus there is that people who get involved realize that the best way to help more people is to grow their business so that we have more potential donors to further our work.” A highlight came when Pope John Paul II invited company leaders to the Vatican to honor them for their positive global impact.

Interestingly, even though the economy has taken a hit in the last year for many nonprofit organizations, Reliv has not seen their donations decrease. “If our distributors have suffered in any way, it is not reflected in the contributions to the Kalogris Foundation,” Montgomery says. “They may be cutting back in other ways, but they are still giving in large numbers.”

For distributors like Johnson, who returned to the States with a fuller appreciation for the smallest of blessings, life will never be the same. “I have learned that you can be happy with very little,” she says. “These children have absolutely nothing, but they are genuinely happy. I do lots of charity work in Atlanta, and even the poorest people here are rich compared to the children there. They live off of the land, eating the roots that grow next to the dump, and they are completely filthy because they play by rolling in the dirt around them. And yet, what is so amazing is that these children don’t even know that they are poor. They are joyful and the most grateful people you have ever met.”

Johnson admits that in no way did the pictures prepare her for this phenomenal experience. “After walking through the dirt and inhaling the putrid smell of trash, then seeing the smiles light up the small faces around me, I came back with a new ‘why,’” she says. “When I started with this company so many years ago, I wanted to be able to be a full-time mom to my daughter, then I wanted to inspire others to realize their full potential and live their dreams through Reliv. Now what drives me to succeed is the idea of helping as many people as possible in the farthest corners of the world, and I have a renewed sense of purpose for making that happen.” *DSN*

For more information, please contact: