

It's hard to focus on your studies when your growling stomach drowns out the teacher. For many kids, math, science, and history lectures take a back seat to the harsh lessons life teaches every day. In Venezuela, as in many developing countries, children scramble for barely nutritive meals, their self-worth at gutter-level. These kids find themselves caught in vicious cycle of poverty so acute that most abandon school before they reach age 13 to eke out a meager living alongside their parents. That is, if they have any.

Reversing the tides of misfortune is a daunting task, but one woman has a plan to give these children the tools they need to become productive members of society. After all, why give a hungry man a fish if you can teach him to be a fisherman?

Christel House is the brainchild of Christel DeHaan, a savvy business woman who made her fortune as the co-owner and developer of Resort Condominiums International (RCI), the world's largest timeshare organization. In 1996, DeHaan sold RCI to New Jersey-based HFS Inc. for \$825 million—10 times the \$67.5 million she invested when she bought out her ex-husband for his half of the business after their widely publicized divorce.

The first Christel House opened in Mexico in 1998 with the goal of "Creating learning centers that adopt an integrated human development model— involving health, education, and behavior—which helps abandoned, orphaned, or impoverished children attain the life competency skills that will guide their success in the future."

This charity does not run orphanages; rather, it helps established ones do a better job by teaching them how to raise money, keep books, and learn management techniques. DeHaan wants to ensure that her program produces real and permanent change, so that means the progress of every Christel House child in nutrition, school performance and social skills will be closely tracked and recorded in a global database dedicated to measuring the program's effectiveness.

As the children grow older, they benefit from academic and vocational scholarships, mentoring programs, and job-placement opportunities. All children who attend Christel House learning centers receive psychological evaluation in addition to medical and dental care. The philanthropist stresses that the structure and follow-through of the approach is designed to ensure effectiveness. "We consulted some of the world's leading authorities on child development in designing this program, and we're



Christel DeHaan.

**Every orphaned, abandoned or impoverished child deserves the opportunity to build a full and rewarding life. Christel House makes that happen — one child at a time.**

■ By YVONNE MILOSEVIC

## CREATIVE GIVING



going to be measuring its results. The whole idea is to create something that truly works—not just a nice thought," DeHaan says.

The foundation currently operates in Mexico, India, South Africa, the United States, and Venezuela. DeHaan plans to spend up to \$1 million a year on operating expenses for each Christel House, and she leverages this money by soliciting corporate donations of goods and services: computers, medical supplies, clothes and books from such companies as Microsoft, Marsh Supermarkets and RCI itself.

The poorest children attend public— not private— schools in Venezuela, and just 33% of these students successfully complete the nine years of schooling "required" by law. Christel House Venezuela plans to combat those staggering statistics. Cementos Lafarge, a leading manufacturer of building materials, provided the charity with a 6,000 square-meter parcel of land and converted a building into the Christel House Learning Center in the La Vega section of Caracas. The institution opened its doors in October 2001 with three seventh-grade sections and a total of 92 students. This September, Christel House began its second year of operations with eight sections of the sev-

enth and eighth grades serving a total of 240 pupils.

Students attend from 7 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and receive an education comparable to other Venezuelan schools, though with a greater emphasis in learning English and in job training. At Christel House, knowledge of English is considered a vital tool because of its importance in the fields of business and commerce around the globe. All students receive free transportation to the center, three square meals a day, and the necessary textbooks, school uniforms and supplies.

The organization has also established a strategic alliance with the Canaima School, which offers similar benefits to 500 children aged four to 11 in pre-school and basic education programs. Christel House provides Canaima School with economic, academic and nutritional support, as well as the possibility for



program graduates to continue the third stage of their basic education (seventh through ninth grades) at the La Vega learning center. In the coming years, Christel House will offer ninth grade and the first and second years of diversified studies, where students choose to focus on either science or humanity courses. Enrollment will increase by 120 students each year for a total of 720 by 2006.

Christel House also offers workshops and training on diverse social issues for parents and the general public, so that the institute helps not only the students and their parents, but also the whole La Vega community.

This is just the beginning of DeHaan's dream to make a difference. More Christel Houses are planned around the globe, and for one very simple reason. "A child has to have hope," the philanthropist says. "Hope is such an energizer. I hope that people, no matter where they are in life in terms of their abilities, their wealth, their dreams and hopes, will always remember that we just can't live for ourselves."

For information on how you can support Christel House Venezuela, call (212) 471-9133/ 9486, or write to [venezuela@ve.christelhouse.org](mailto:venezuela@ve.christelhouse.org)