



America's Winning Smile

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By Kate Kennedy

Jim Hake wanted to do something to help America's position in the world, but he never thought that toothpaste and toothbrushes would be part of the equation.

"Like a lot of people after 9/11, I was trying to think of ways to help our situation and thought about making some kind of contribution" to the war on terrorism, Hake tells Philanthropy. But it wasn't until earlier this year that he realized how he could contribute.

While watching the National Geographic channel, he stumbled on a story about American troops in Afghanistan that featured Special Forces Sergeant Jay Smith, who was using baseball equipment to win over the children and residents of Orgun-E, Afghanistan, a town just 19 miles from the Pakistan border. The story motivated him to found Spirit of America—a nonprofit organization that helps Americans serving abroad improve the lives of people in need by providing them basic supplies that traditional aid services don't provide.

Originally, Smith just wanted to give some local boys a small gift because they'd helped in the camp's kitchen. At Smith's request, his wife rallied friends and neighbors to buy gloves and balls for the children. The gifts bought more than good feelings, however, they quite literally saved lives.

One evening the troops came under fire from an Al-Qaeda rocket attack. Afterwards, the residents of Orgun-E formed their own community watch. They patrolled the village at night to protect the troops, and because of their initiative the attacks stopped.

In an effort to multiply Smith's success on a larger scale, Hake used funds from the sale of his Internet company in Los Angeles to launch Spirit of America. Through it, he is creating stories every bit as powerful as Sergeant Smith's across the globe.

The process is relatively simple. Interested donors visit Spirit of America's website and select from various requests for aid submitted by U.S. servicemen as well as by Foreign Service, USAID, and other assistance personnel serving abroad. The requests often involve those aspects of humanitarian aid that get lost in the shuffle of serving the needy: sports equipment, preschool toys, pencils, and paper. The donors then provide the funding requested, and Spirit of America takes care of procuring and shipping the aid. All the goods include a message of friendship from the American people.

But what about the toothpaste and toothbrushes? Among those requesting aid through Spirit of America was Lieutenant Colonel Al Burghard, who asked Spirit of America for dental supplies for the children of Al Hillah, Iraq, located south of Baghdad.

“Dental hygiene over here is horrible,” Burghard said. “In a country where you only got what Saddam wanted you to have, dental care was low in priority. Children have wonderful smiles and we want to help keep them that way.”

Individual donors across America contributed \$4,800—enough to buy 2,000 dental packs—through Spirit of America. The packs were shipped to Iraq compliments of Federal Express.

This relatively inexpensive show of compassion netted the Marines the trust of Al Hillah’s citizens. Burghard wrote in an e-mail that the town’s citizens brought silk flowers and a religious icon to his unit as a gift. “We were shown by the village that they not only trusted us, but considered us as a part of their tribal family. That display of trust was the crowning moment of our interaction with them.”

“Where the real difference is made,” says Hake, “is on that one-to-one, grassroots level.” All Hake asks in return is feedback. “A critical part of closing the loop is getting the feedback from the requestor,” he says. That will provide the most important aid to measuring the intangible effects Spirit of America has on different cultures.

Hake believes that U.S. servicemen in Iraq and Afghanistan have great opportunities to build good will for America if they have the freedom and discretion to distribute sports and other equipment to locals. As Spirit of America strengthens relations between the troops and residents, it is clear to Hake that “we can both assist those in need and help America further reflect and perpetuate the ideals for which it stands.”

Officially, the organization takes no position on the war in Iraq or Afghanistan. As far as Hake is concerned, the troops “are there and their relationship with the people in those countries is what’s most important, so we’re going to support them every way we can.”

And it’s not just American forces Spirit of America will assist. Hake anticipates the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) making requests. He also envisions the Peace Corps as a key group, because “they work in a very grassroots, entrepreneurial way.”

A picture can tell a thousand words. But the snapshot on Spirit of America’s website of a little Iraqi girl holding a dental kit while in the arms of U.S. Marine Corporal Youness Hansali does much more. It makes one ponder the deep impact that small acts of kindness can have on a society which has only known war and deprivation.