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Since its creation in 2009, Sharefish, a Raleigh-based nonprofit dedicated to improving conditions in impoverished communities, has sponsored 71 schoolchildren in Honduras.

Learning to share

Raleigh nonprofit spreads resources to Honduran children

by Taylor Madaffari

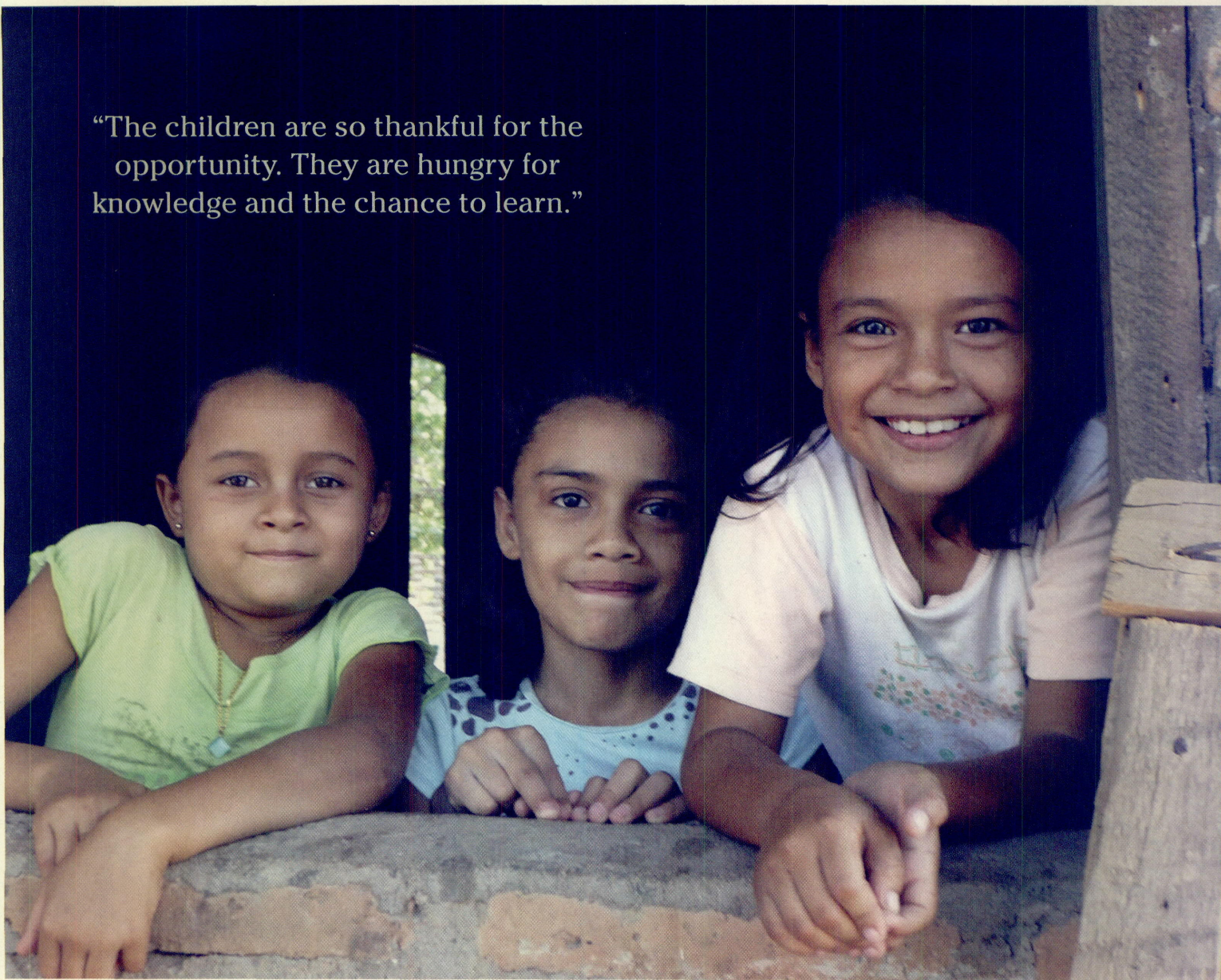
She stands on the heat-scorching earth — her T-shirt filthy and tattered, with dirt-seamed fingers gripping a pen in concentration — biting her lip as she tries to write her name: Cindy Maria, or Peluche (plush), nicknamed for her wild thicket of hair. She is one of the forgotten — a lost community of people with a precarious foothold in a remote region of Honduras.

It is a life of desperate poverty, of widespread illiteracy, of houses made from mud and sticks, of physically exhausting fieldwork and menial labor. But one group of six intrepid men and women are determined to change all of that, one disadvantaged child at a time.

They are the founding board members of Sharefish, a Raleigh-based nonprofit dedicated to improving education, nutrition, housing, medical and economic opportunities in impoverished communities, which currently include Altos de Santa Marta and El Carrizo in southern Honduras — one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere.

photos: Sharefish

“The children are so thankful for the opportunity. They are hungry for knowledge and the chance to learn.”



Planting a seed

The seed for Sharefish was planted during a 2009 mission trip to Honduras that was organized by the North Carolina Baptist Men. Oie Osterkamp, a Raleigh business consultant and president of Sharefish, and four fellow volunteers discussed creating a program of their own to serve Honduras.

“We all loved the country and the wonderful people there,” Osterkamp says. “We wanted to show them that not only were they not forgotten, but they also were loved.”

So they banded together, pooled

their time and talent, and created the organization they had envisioned, which owes its name to Osterkamp’s mother’s original proverb: “It is better to be a Sharefish than a Selfish.”

Sharing big

So far, the group has made great strides. It has launched a sponsorship program, which gives people in the United States an opportunity to fund a Honduran child’s education: \$365 per year for elementary school students and \$600 per year for high school students, which includes uniforms, shoes, books, and

To learn more

For more information on Sharefish or to sign up for updates and its newsletter, call (919) 210-0600 or visit www.sharefish.org.

supplies. It also gives each child’s family one nutritious meal per day as an incentive to keep him or her in school instead of laboring in hot fields or selling fruit on the street.

Osterkamp makes it clear that donations are given through a conditional cash transfer program, not as a handout

“When parents come up to me with tears in their eyes and thank me for helping them give their children something they saw no hope in giving them on their own, that is important.”

or welfare program. In order to qualify for sponsorship, a child must stay in school and maintain passing grades. In a mere two years, Sharefish has sponsored 71 children, with a 90 percent retention rate. According to Osterkamp, the graduation rate this year should be close to 100 percent, and the number of children continuing their education beyond six years is increasing.

“The people we work with in

Honduras are warm, friendly and proud. All they ask for is an opportunity for their children to work in other places besides produce fields,” Osterkamp says.

“The children are so thankful for the opportunity,” he adds. “They are hungry for knowledge and the chance to learn.”

The organization also has established two libraries, helping villagers to elect their own library committee and develop a system for book checkouts and returns. The library in Santa Marta now features more than 200 books, as well as maps and a computer.

“The libraries have provided a resource for those who know how to read and write to be able to teach those who want to learn how to read and write,” Osterkamp says.

Writing her name

Not everything has been a success, however. Unfortunately, Peluche never learned how to write her name. Osterkamp first met her on the 2009 mission trip and was so profoundly moved by her that he purchased supplies so that she could

attend school. She was elated with her gifts, thrilled to join the other children at school. But when Osterkamp returned to the village a year later, he found Peluche much as he'd left her, but the light had left her eyes. She had spent one day in school before her father promptly sold her uniforms, shoes and supplies for alcohol.

Osterkamp contemplates the obstacles the organization has confronted in its few short years.

“From our setbacks, we refined our purpose. From our doubts, we strengthened our faith. From our discouragement, we found the depth of our commitment,” he says, adding that Peluche's story is a great example of when things don't occur as planned.

“Sometimes, you find yourself in a place with more than you ever dreamed,” he says.

On the plane ride home from visiting Peluche, Osterkamp was devastated, beleaguered by doubt and anxiety. But then he reached for the magazine in the seatback

photo: Sharefish



The Santa Marta library in Honduras, one of two set up by Sharefish, features more than 200 books.

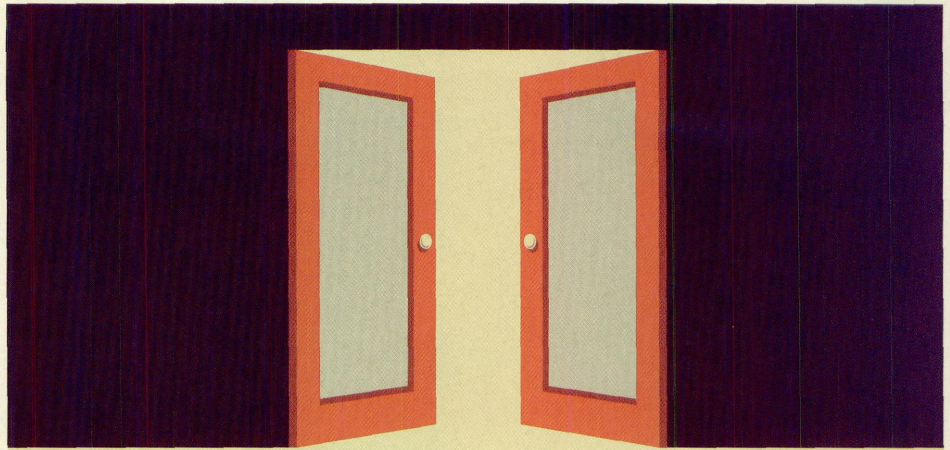
in front of him and opened to a random page. The bolded words reaffirmed everything he was trying to achieve with Sharefish: "The two most important days in a person's life are the day they are born and the day they figure out why they were born."

Osterkamp certainly has realized his fate. When asked if he believes he can change the world, he doesn't hesitate.

"When the children can dream about becoming teachers and health care providers and engineers instead of sugar cane harvesters, that is important," he says. "When parents come up to me with tears in their eyes and thank me for helping them give their children something they saw no hope in giving them on their own, that is important."

"Is it changing the world?" he asks himself. "Come with Sharefish on a visit, and ask a child if his world is any different. I think you'll like the answer." **WL**

Taylor Madaffari is an editorial intern with Wake Living and Triad Living magazines.



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