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Christian Foundation for Children and Aging co-founder Bob Hentzen dies

Megan Fincher | Oct. 11, 2013

Bob Hentzen, co-founder and president of the Christian Foundation for Children and Aging [1], died Tuesday. He was 77.

No suit and tie businessman, Hentzen recently walked 8,000 miles across South America to find sponsors for 8,000 impoverished children. Christian Foundation for Children and Aging connects sponsors directly with individuals in poverty, and monetary donations are tailored to the sponsored member's needs.

"Bob's office was on the road, and the homes of the families were his boardroom. The reward was a shared cup of coffee," Laney Haake, the foundation's director of U.S. outreach, wrote in an email to *NCR*.

Hentzen was born on a Kansas farm March 29, 1936, and died Tuesday in San Lucas Tolimán, Guatemala, his adopted home.

Hentzen joined the Christian Brothers in 1953 and moved to Latin America six years later to teach children in Colombia and Guatemala. He left the order in 1970 but continued teaching in Guatemala for three years. Henzen then moved back to the States and established a teaching career, but the experience of living with the poor never left him.

In Latin America, Hentzen underwent "the journey from power to love," Francis "Paco" Wertin, current head of the foundation, told *NCR*. "He wrote a song with the lines, 'I came to teach the poor, but then it happened, oh, Lord. I fell in love with your people, I could not leave.' "

"He talked about the time he was in Guatemala as the time he was reborn," said Scott Wasserman, Christian Foundation for Children and Aging board president. "It made a big impression on him."

That big impression eventually turned into a calling, and in 1981, Hentzen established the Christian Foundation for Children and Aging with three of his siblings as well as his friend and former Jesuit missionary Jerry Tolle. They started by asking people to sponsor families Hentzen and Tolle met during their missionary years, and 32 years later, donors have given over $1 billion in benefits to more than 625,000 families in need.

The foundation is a lay-led Catholic nonprofit headquartered in Kansas City, Kan., that supports 300,000 destitute children and elderly people in 21 countries. As a decentralized organization, donors are asked to sponsor an individual in need with monetary support, photographs and letters. Mothers, assisted by foundation staff, then decide how the donated money will be used. Sponsored children are expected to go to school, and both sponsored children and the elderly write to their sponsors and participate in local foundation-backed projects.

Hentzen "referred to everyone involved in CFCA as a co-founder. That included the sponsor and the sponsored. That's not just verbiage; Bob really lived that," Wasserman said.

Paul Pearce, the foundation's director of global strategy, agreed: "For Bob, it wasn't theoretical. He fell in love with the poor through personal encounters."

Christian Foundation for Children and Aging ventures are located in 21 countries, but Hentzen and his wife, Cristina, regularly visited all of them. Hentzen did not think of the foundation as a charity, but as "a movement" where "relationship is the priority," Wasserman said.

After working at the foundation's headquarters in Kansas City for 15 years, the Hentzens decided to move to Guatemala permanently. In solidarity with the poor, the couple walked there. It took them eight months to walk the roughly 4,000 miles.

"His walk was a symbol of CFCA. The walking with, the accompanying, shoulder to shoulder, equals: All of those concepts became reality for him," Wertin said.

The Hentzens doubled that distance two years ago. In a campaign to find sponsors for 8,000 children, the couple pledged to walk the 8,000 miles from their home in Guatemala to Chile. During the journey, they crossed through El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Brazil.

"Society has told [the poor] all along that they are not capable," Hentzen said during the walk, according to a news release from the foundation. "We are here to tell them they are quite capable. You are not alone. We are walking with you."

It took the Hentzens 16 months to complete the journey, and their fearlessness inspired overwhelming support, with people pledging to sponsor 8,127 children.

"He was building relationships, breaking down isolation. He walked right into the hearts and homes of our dear sisters and brothers living in poverty," Wertin said.

Wasserman recalled Hentzen as "robust and vital and full of life. He wrote a song that had the line, 'There's great adventure in the simple life, great adventure to serve.' "

Bob is survived by Cristina, their six children, 11 grandchildren and seven sponsored children.

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