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HUMANITARIANS *of the* HIGH STEPPE

The Flagstaff International Relief Effort
celebrates 15 years of noble work in Mongolia

By Betsy Bruner

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Underfed babies in an orphanage, Ulaanbaator, Mongolia 1992. Photo by David Edwards

Winters are extreme, dropping down to an average of negative-40 degrees in some areas, and winds blow snow so hard it doesn't have time to melt. In the spring, unseasonably cold weather, called *dzud*, can kill the first hint of grasses, leaving livestock that have survived the bitter winter, no fodder to eat. In the winter of 2009-2010, a *dzud* killed 8 million livestock, about 17 percent of the total.

Mongolia is a landlocked country between China and Russia, where nomadic life is still a living tradition and the capital city of Ulaanbaator, which has the same latitude as southern Canada and northern Montana, is the coldest in the world.

Trail of goat herders, Bayan Olgii, Mongolia, 2005. Photo by Meredith Potts

Meredith Potts visiting with a patient at Trauma Hospital, Ulaanbaator, Mongolia, 2008.
Photo by Susan Allen



"Nap Time," Kindergarten distribution, Ulaanbaator, Mongolia, 2006. Photo by Meredith Potts

"People were freezing to death. They desperately needed warm clothing. I started taking over winter clothing. I would hand the clothing directly to the kids. I went there twice, and one year I took over 19 duffel bags," says local photographer and FIRE founder Dave Edwards.

Kids living under the city

Shortly after the departure of the Soviet Union from Mongolia in 1990 and the collapse of the Mongolian economy, local photographer David Edwards was on the scene in 1992. He had already established an international reputation for his documentary photography of Central Asia.

After having previously photographed horrors in Afghanistan during the war with Russia, he was still shocked by what he saw in Mongolia, especially the city conditions.

He found a country with few Westerners and even fewer photographers.

"I had to go to England to get a special visa; it had no exit date, so I was stuck in the country," Edwards recalls. "I was going around with a social worker photographing the Mongol condition as a photojournalist and documentary photographer."

Then he saw the condition of the kids.

"I went into the slums," he says. "I remember some elderly

ladies who had no husbands and lived together. They got a minuscule amount of money from the government. They were taking care of eight street children. In the early 1990s the number of street children swelled to estimates of more than 4,000. I went to orphanages, and I saw children starving to death. Most children would escape and go to the street to steal and prostitute themselves to survive."

The street children often took refuge in the heating-duct tunnels the Soviets built under the city. "Sometimes the kids would be sleeping and the water would drip; they'd be horribly burned," Edwards says. "People were freezing to death. They desperately needed warm clothing. I started taking over winter clothing. I would hand the clothing directly to the kids. I went there twice, and one year I took over 19 duffel bags."

Flagstaff takes action

Back in Flagstaff in 1998, Edwards, and a group of committed

Flagstaff citizens motivated by his photographs and stories about conditions in Mongolia, started the Mongolian Orphans Association, which changed its name in 2000 to the Flagstaff International Relief Effort.

Today, the organization is celebrating its 15th year of operation, with a renewed effort at fundraising.

"True charity is doing something you don't get credit for," Edwards says. "My main contribution to FIRE has been making sure we go directly to the people—no middle man. This is how we started, and this is what we are still doing today."

It took the energy and work of many volunteers in Flagstaff to set FIRE in motion, from individuals to groups like local churches and the Flagstaff Arts and Leadership Academy. The distribution process had difficult moments as well as ones of really connecting the donations from the people of Flagstaff with those in need in the far off steppeland of Mongolia, says Jason Hasenbank, a coordinator who went on the 1999 and 2000 distribution trips.

Ryan Strong, a volunteer from FALA, joined the 1999 and 2004 trips, after first collecting, sorting and packing boxes for Mongolia.

"The work I was blessed to be a part of with FIRE has influenced the direction of my entire life. The suffering that we were confronted with totally changed my worldview. I really wouldn't be the person I am today without FIRE," Strong says.

The numbers were staggering. Between 1999 and 2009, FIRE volunteers shipped and personally delivered 10, 40-foot containers.

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Traveling to a medical distribution, Bayan-Olgii, Mongolia 2005. Photo by Suzanne Molsinger

“We met one nurse who said she was stuck with used needles an average of 40 times a month,” says FIRE director Meredith Potts. “Another nurse regularly carried used needles from the clinic to the disposal site on a crowded public bus in a plastic bag. These are things we don’t think about here. But they are serious issues in the developing world.”

healthcare workers for hepatitis B.

“We have a staff of three Mongolians and an office in Ulaanbaator,” Potts says. “Our medical director has been with us three years and has led FIRE to repeated recognition from within Mongolia for our hepatitis work. Together, I think we make a very strong team effecting change.”

In 2009, FIRE staff signed a Memorandum of Understanding

with the Mongolian Ministry of Health and continues to collaborate with leading global health organizations. Working conditions have also been a concern.

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Collecting samples for the NIH research project. Khenti, Mongolia, 2012. Photo by FIRE staff

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A mission in motion

The nonprofit currently has a pilot program where FIRE doctors are going from clinic to clinic, spending several days teaching healthcare workers to set up proper medical waste-handling systems and providing essential related medical supplies that are often too expensive for Mongolians.

This personal touch is what makes FIRE different from so many other international aid organizations: Taking the time and effort to personally assess the need and deliver the aid and training.

“Just like we used to go ger-to-ger [yurt-to-yurt], with clothing and blankets, we now are going clinic-to-clinic with life-saving information,” Potts says.

Another program in development is building bathrooms and showers in schools, complete with running water in areas where even the homes don’t have running water.

This sanitation project will help prevent communicable and waterborne diseases such as diarrhea and hepatitis A.


“We have good momentum going with our hepatitis work in Mongolia, and we are currently looking into opportunities to involve volunteers again,” Potts says. “We were started by and have been sustained by volunteers. I would like to connect back to volunteer trips.”

Hasenbank says he is amazed by how Potts has enhanced and expanded the original mission of FIRE over time, but she doesn’t take credit for herself.

“There have been many pivotal people along the way that we owe a tremendous amount; I could never name them all,” she says.

Today FIRE receives a great deal of its funding from within Mongolia. While grants cover all program expenses, most grants do not allow for administrative expenses, such as salaries or rent.

“We are still very dependent on individual donors,” Potts says. “Right now we are trying to raise \$10,000, which will be matched 50 percent by one of our donors in honor of our 15th year. This will help keep our projects in motion until the end of the year, when new grant funding will kick in.”

To learn more about the FIRE mission, visit the organization’s website, www.fireprojects.org, or call Meredith Potts at 779-2288. 



Clothing distribution with photographer and FIRE founder Dave Edwards, Sukhbaatar, Mongolia, 1999. Photo by Geoff Gourley

They had hand-delivered 76 tons of winter clothing to 65,000 individuals, provided 80 computers and 6,000 English books to a dozen schools, distributed \$720,000-worth of medical supplies, and given 1,000 hours of medical training to 50 rural clinics and hospitals.

"The people of Flagstaff did this," Edwards says.

In 2003, Meredith Potts, manager at the David Edwards photography studio, became involved, eventually becoming executive director in 2004. A complicated process ensured that the poorest of the poor received the needed supplies.

"But this took a lot of time sorting through literally tons of clothing," Potts says. "In Mongolia, each morning we would load a van, with most of the seats removed, with boxes of clothing, a translator, volunteers, a driver and a social worker. All the boxes had been sorted and labeled in Flagstaff. Boxes were sorted by size,

item and gender. This process also ensured that we only distributed to the poorest of the poor."

FIRE changes focus

In 2008, after 10 years of clothing distributions, Mongolia was changing and the need for warm clothing was not as great as it once was.

"As an organization, we wanted to effect long-term change, rather than only meet an immediate need," Potts says. "We started to take a closer look at the hospitals and clinics."

A lead researcher from the National Institutes of Health and a medical waste management specialist, approached FIRE, both wanting to address the hepatitis issue in Mongolia. "In 2009, we all met in Mongolia and created a plan," says Potts.

Today FIRE is focused on hepatitis-related issues. "Most

healthcare facilities do not handle their needles, sharps, medical waste correctly," she says. "This has given Mongolia a hepatitis epidemic leading to a cirrhosis epidemic, and giving Mongolia the highest rate of liver cancer in the world. I believe that in five or 10 years, we will look back at the declining hepatitis rate and the deaths prevented and be able to say, 'We helped with that.' That is impact. That is empowering Mongolia."

With these changes in focus, the need for volunteer trips lessened, replaced by key, long-term expert Western medical volunteers and Mongolian medical staff.

Since 2009, FIRE has trained 2,000 healthcare workers, distributed 141,500 biohazard medical waste boxes, thousands of training materials and created and distributed 1,700 copies of a health safety training DVDs for healthcare workers. Working in 16 of Mongolia's 21 provinces, they have tested and vaccinated