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World's orphans are Blanca man's mission



COURTESY PHOTO/OUR FAMILY ORPHAN COMMUNITIES

Bob Miller (right) is pictured with three unidentified officials from Ninh Binh province during his tour of Vietnam in November.

By MATT HILDNER
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

ALAMOSA - As in many rural areas, talk of the potential of renewable energy abounds in the San Luis Valley.

But for one Blanca man, the development of ethanol may hold the key to making life better for the estimated 107 million orphans around the world.

Bob Miller and his group, Our Family Orphan Communities, are looking to build a community for orphans in Vietnam that would be both economically and environmentally stable.

An ethanol refinery that uses sugar cane as its main feedstock serves as the linchpin of the group's plans. Miller estimates the refinery would employ slightly more than 100

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people, while creating up to four times as many spinoff jobs.

More importantly, profits from the refinery would serve as a stable source of funding for the orphanage and its programs.

"You look at any orphanage throughout the world and they're holding their hand out, saying we need more help, we need to have money for clothes, we need to have money for food," Miller said. "Or, if they say they're self-sustaining, they had just enough food for last year, but next year is coming.

"Rather than provide additional funds to institutions that really aren't as effective as they need to be, we're trying to come up with a new model," he said. So far the group has visited Vietnam three times and, along with the Vietnam Aid Society for Disabled Children, has met with the country's vice president and secured a donation of land in Ninh Binh province in the northern end of the country.

Miller envisions a community that would take in 160 to 200 orphans with living quarters that each would house 16 children and four surrogate parents and grandparents.

Other components of the project likely would include aquaculture and other forms of agriculture, including the growing of sugar cane for the project.

In focusing on sugar cane, Miller hopes to avoid driving up the cost of food grains, a side effect of the ethanol boom.

"We've been told by people in South Africa, if you're talking about (using) food stocks or food grains, forget it. Same thing in China. Same thing in Vietnam," he said.

Miller said the plant there will utilize an acid-based refining process as opposed to an enzyme-based one that would require specific food stocks.

The acid-based process, by contrast, can take on all feed stocks and increase the number of co-products, such as artificial sweeteners, that can be sold.

Although Miller has been wrestling with the specific plans for an ethanol-financed orphanage for more than three years, his interest in orphans started in the early 1990s.

While making vacation plans from his job as a consultant, Miller decided he wanted the respite to serve a purpose other than recreation.

"For some reason, I was at that point in my life, where I began thinking I need to roll my sleeves up and do something, not just write another check to another charity

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somewhere," he said.

Given that he knew some Spanish, he decided to focus on Mexico and ended up going to Guadalajara. There he volunteered at an orphanage that housed 120 kids and had a staff of five people.

He did odd jobs that included everything from taking kids to the movies to applying Band-Aids to cuts and scrapes.

"It just hit me like an emotional brick," he said. "Nothing ever touched me that deep in my life."

Miller continued to volunteer at the orphanage during his vacations and when the orphanage shut down, he eventually adopted two boys, Arturo and Eduardo, who are now grown and living in Pueblo.

Miller was unable to work the ethanol idea in Mexico because of the state petroleum industry that controls fuel production, but a contact from his consulting business, pointed him toward Vietnam.

Now Miller and his group are in the process of raising money for a study that will be used to help secure all of the permits for the project and, hopefully, more donors.

He's also looking for volunteers to help with the project, which he hopes will one day expand to other countries.

Miller has business plans waiting in the wings for 15 other countries and, should the Vietnamese project take off, he thinks others soon could follow.

"Once the first one is going - even close to being fully functional - we expect to hear a virtual explosion of, 'We want that over here,' " he said.

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