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The World

## Taxi Driver Takes New Route After Visit to South Africa

*Philanthropy: Austrian man establishes an aid organization for poor people in a number of developing countries*

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VIENNA, Austria -- Taxi driver Hannes Urban didn't start out to be anyone's savior when he went to South Africa, but his life took a turn.

Urban's plan was to visit one of the many pen pals he'd exchanged letters with over the years when he flew off from Vienna in 1998. That friendship didn't last, however.

"My pen pal wanted to marry me, so I fled," says Urban, 45. But by the time his vacation ended, he had discovered a deeper calling: Shocked by the poverty he witnessed on the streets of Cape Town, he left determined to help some of the beggars he had met there.

"I met a homeless woman there with a sick baby," Urban says. "So I went to the supermarket and bought her milk, yogurt, bananas. I told her I would come back to South Africa and make sure her child goes to kindergarten."

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Since making that promise, Urban has founded his own aid organization, which has built a kindergarten attended by about 36 South African children a year.

He has also launched projects in several developing countries aimed at bringing food and medicine to poor people. Current projects include providing medical treatment to the rural poor in Mexico and delivering food packages to hundreds in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya.

Urban spends half the year in those various countries. The rest of the year he spends back in Vienna driving his taxi and raising money for his projects.

A Roman Catholic driven by the desire to do God's work, Urban says he never set out to establish his own charity. "My target was simply to help the poor and the sick,"

He describes how a string of chance events led him to found his group, "Wir Helfen" (We Help).

After his first visit to South Africa, Urban told his hairdresser about the homeless woman with the baby. She wanted to send some of her clothing to the woman. "But I told her I didn't have room in my backpack," he recalls.

Then, at a bar frequented by many of Vienna's taxi drivers, word spread among the regulars that Urban planned another trip to South Africa.

"Before I knew it, they had collected 150 kilograms [330 pounds] of clothing," Urban says. "I didn't know what to do, so I went to a travel agency and asked if they could carry it as missionary goods."

British Airways agreed to transport the material for free, and Urban soon returned to South Africa carrying seven large cardboard boxes of used clothes. During that two-month visit, he met Theobeka Beatrice Sibayi, a kindergarten teacher struggling to support her family.

"At my last supper there, I had the inspiration to go home, raise money and build a kindergarten for Theobeka," he says. "I returned to Vienna euphoric, thinking I would go from parish to parish (to raise money), but that didn't work out because the churches already had their own projects."

So as he drove his taxi through Vienna, he told his customers he was building a kindergarten in South Africa. The response was overwhelming. "A lot of people said they wanted to donate money."

In 2000, he founded the charity to give it "an official character." He since has had to overcome various obstacles, such as importing into Mexico medicines donated by pharmacies in Austria.

Last year, he says, he raised \$200,000. Because he lives simply—in South Africa he lives in a hut alongside those to whom he brings both charity and prayers—95% of what he raises goes directly to his projects.

Urban was recently in Mexico to bring a team of medical professionals to poor Indian farmers at Santiago Tuxtla, in the Mexican state of Veracruz.

The team saw about 500 patients over six days, treating them mainly for conditions such as diabetes, osteoporosis, high blood pressure and skin disorders, says Angeles Garcia Braun, one of the volunteers.

Garcia, a 43-year-old native of Spain, says the team hoped in particular to treat women and girls, since they often receive no medical care in impoverished Mexican communities. "The girls are also ashamed to talk about certain parts of their body and would not say anything about their problems, even if they're dying," she says.

The women and girls responded with overwhelming gratitude, Garcia says.

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