

Filipino orphans grab Stouffville pastor's heart

Hayden wants town to adopt rescue centre

BY HANNELORE VOLPE
Staff Writer

Children nobody wants, are abused or are dying of malnutrition and need help fast are the ones brought to the Gentle Hands ministry in the Philippines.

Pastor Marnie Hayden of the Bethel Pentecostal Assembly of God on Hwy. 48 visited the ministry's orphanage and boys' school for a month last summer to help feed and comfort the children.

She returned determined to do more. Evan Graff, who runs Gentle Hands with his wife Charity, was in Stouffville last week to talk to local churches about his work.

Mrs. Hayden has also had invitations to talk to church and other groups about the centre.

"I would love Stouffville to adopt this little rescue centre for kids and catch a vision of what a huge difference our 'play money' can make in the lives of so many kids," she said.

About 90 per cent of the ministry's funding comes from individual donations. The rest is from corporations or foundations in the Philippines.

Mr. Graff calls his centre an orphanage and education centre. He began working there in 2000, when he and his wife moved to the Philippines from Canada.

Mrs. Graff had worked in the Philippines with her parents since 1987, coming back to Canada occasionally. Gentle Hands soon became a birthing and primary child care centre, Charity's mom,

Denie Heppner, who is a nurse, began delivering babies at the centre around 1990.

By the time the centre stopped doing deliveries in 2005, about 5,000 babies had been born there, Mr. Graff said in an interview.

The ministry became incorporated as a Philippines charitable organization in 1993.

Mrs. Graff's parents turned the centre over to the younger couple a few years ago.

"My faith is the reason I am there in the first place," Mr. Graff said. "Growing up, I had the idea I would found a school."

As part of their mission, the Graffs run a school for street children aged 12 to 18. There are about 30 of the youngsters at the schools, many of them former gang members and drug addicts.

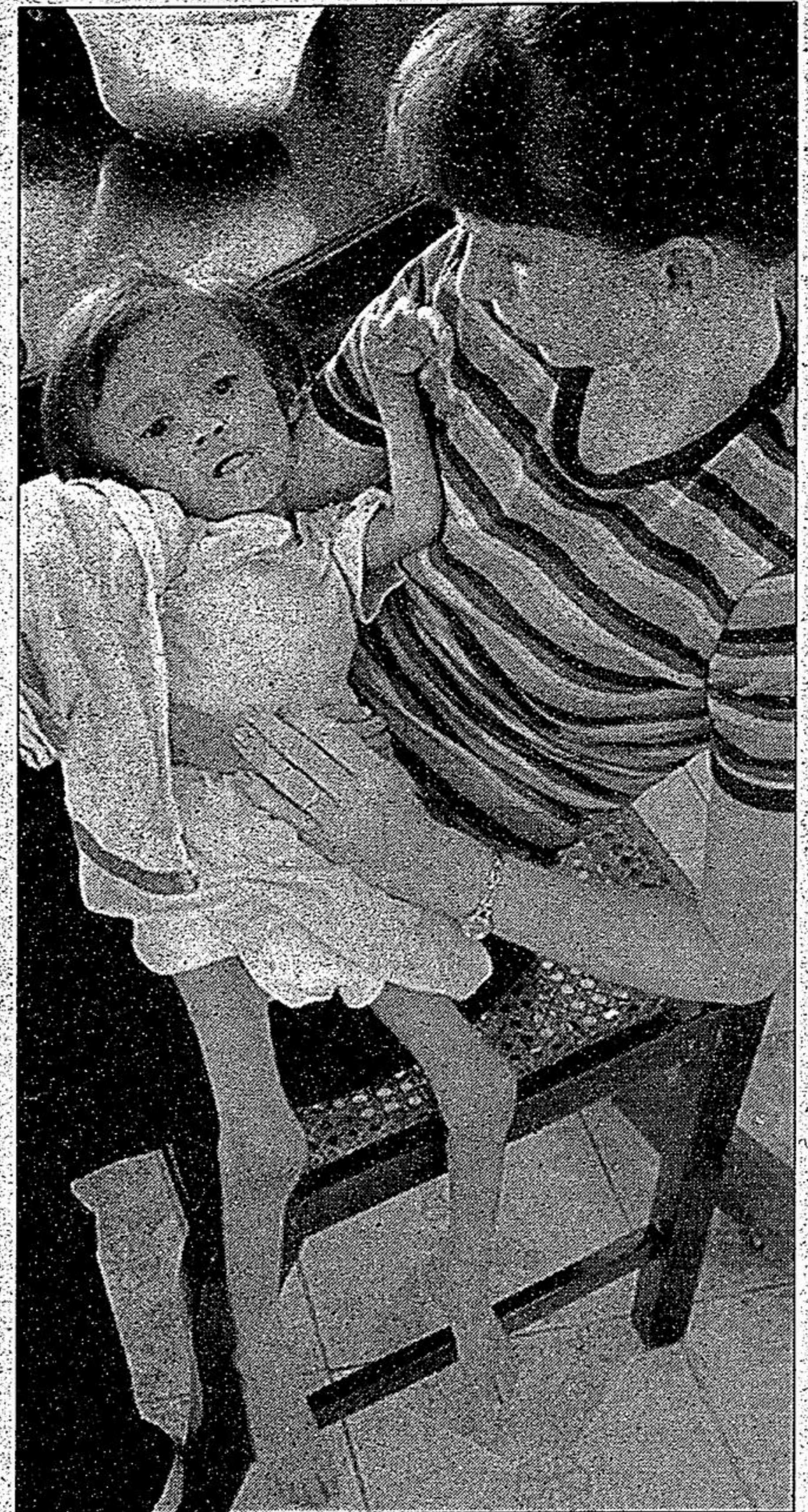
The orphanage has as many as 20 children at a time who are there for a variety of reasons. Many are malnourished babies and toddlers, who are revived with patient feeding by Mrs. Graff and other staff members, all of whom are Filipinos.

Some of the children are burn patients, some abandoned by their parents, some too sick to go home from hospital right away. The Graffs learned how to take care of burns and to mix rehydrating fluids themselves.

The care given to the children at the centre is passed on, Mr. Graff found. One day he saw one of the tough ex-gang members from the boys' school carrying a small toddler around in a sling for most of the day to comfort him. The boys have a chance to do their high school equivalency with the ministry and some of them stay on to become staff members.

The school is becoming so well-known other social welfare agencies will refer children.

For more information, visit gentlehands.org to donate, call the Bethel Pentecostal Assembly of God at 905-640-5555.



Charity Graff comforts Kim at orphanage and rescue centre her family operates in the Philippines. Stouffville pastor Marnie Hayden wants Whitchurch-Stouffville residents to adopt the centre. Evan Graff visited local churches last week.

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