

■ *Mercy Corps to launch interactive action center at its new site*

Global help is on its way

After the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the Portland-based nonprofit Mercy Corps responded in New York with a program called Comfort for Kids. The international humanitarian organization, which typically responds to overseas crises, found a niche working with refugee and immigrant children affected by the attacks.

Comfort for Kids was later adapted for children in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and is being implemented now in the earthquake-struck area of China.

Mercy Corps' newest project also involves young people, but this time, it's not to help them, it's a way for them to help. The organization is planning two action centers, one in New York City and one in Portland.

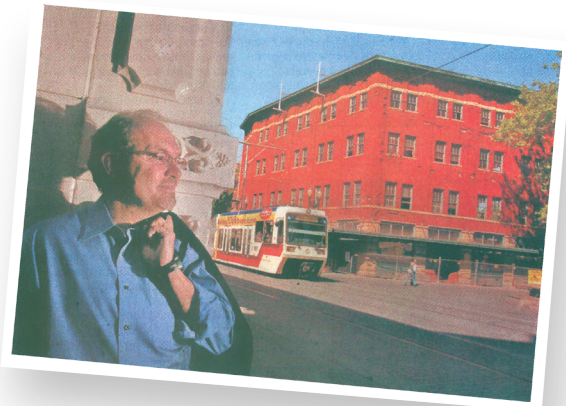
The centers are multimedia exhibits designed to illuminate world events and explain the work of Mercy Corps

and other aid organizations. Overall, the goal is to answer the question, What can I do?

"The hope," says Neal Keny-Guyer, the CEO of Mercy Corps, "is that we'll empower a whole generation of young people to see the world in a different light, and even more importantly, to believe that they can make a positive difference around these global issues."

The Action Center to End World Hunger opens in New York City, a few blocks from Ground Zero, this October. A similar Mercy Corps Action Center will open in Portland about a year later, in the fall of 2009.

Well-known museum designer Edwin Schlossberg and his firm, ESI Design, are creating interactive digital displays that allow participants to delve into, for instance, the toll of conflict on Afghanistan, the issue of land rights in Guatemala or climate change in Niger.



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Mercy Corps' new world headquarters will be home to an educational action center that CEO Neal Keny-Guyer hopes can offer ways to effect positive change in the world. Scheduled to open in fall 2009, the Old Town building is undergoing wholesale reconstruction to obtain the highest possible rating for sustainability.



Mercy: Worldwide staff numbers 3,500

News of international current events will be up-to-the-minute. There's also a companion Web site, www.actioncenter.org, which is live now.

School groups will be a large part of the audience, but Mercy Corps also expects about a third of visitors to the Portland center to be tourists.

"There's a huge appetite for information about global issues in Portland," says Susan Laarman, senior communications officer for Mercy Corps. "We get calls every day, people want to know what's happening and how they can get involved."

Center to open in new digs

The opening of the Portland action center coincides with Mercy Corps' move from a cluster of offices in Southwest Portland to a world headquarters building next to the Skidmore Fountain.

The building, currently a work in progress, combines a restoration of a historic brick building with new construction. The entire structure will be certified LEED Platinum, meaning it has earned the highest possible rating of the U.S. Green Building Council for sustainability.

Mercy Corps was founded in 1979 by Seattle resident Dan O'Neill and Portlander Ellis Culver. The group has grown dramatically over the years — the organization's assets have roughly doubled since 2000, going from \$128 million to a projected \$250 million for 2008. Mercy Corps served 2 million people in 1997, and 16.4 million in 2007.

Thomas Bruner, regional executive of the American Red Cross Oregon Chapters, calls Mercy Corps "one of Portland's homegrown treasures." The organization is particularly effective, he believes, at capturing the imagination of the public.

"They have done a marvelous job of getting the message out at a time when global consciousness in society has increased," he says.

Mercy Corps currently is working in 35 countries, including Iraq, Georgia and Sudan, with a staff of 3,500 worldwide.

Most of the worldwide staff is native to the region of a specific project,

supplemented by a nucleus of highly trained humanitarian workers.

They work with other aid groups such as the International Red Cross, CARE, Oxfam and Medical Teams International when disaster strikes, as with the Indonesia tsunami of 2004, which triggered a huge spike in donations.

"We're known for emergency response because that's what gets the headlines," Laarman says, "but longer-term economic development, sustainable economic development, is a very important part of our work."

Mercy Corps has been very successful with a strategy called micro-financing, using very small business loans as seeds for economic self-sufficiency. Individuals can use the loans to start small plots of vegetables for farmers markets, to buy chickens for breeding, or to build and repair bicycles.

Programs like these will be highlighted in the Portland and New York action centers. Laarman says, "We think the kids will probably walk away with the understanding that it's sometimes very simple but creative ideas that can take off or can really make a difference."

"To better understand what each other's world is like breeds tolerance," she adds, "and hopefully we address some of the causes of some of the problems we have in the world today and make our job easier in the long run."

Positive avenues offered Most directly, the action centers will present ways for children and adults to offer immediate help. They can make a donation or write a letter on the spot. Each educational display ends with three examples of ways to get involved.

Sometimes it's just stretching your mind to imagine yourself in someone else's shoes. It could be checking to see whether a local retailer carries fair trade goods, or starting a food drive, or reducing your carbon footprint.

As Mercy Corps has grown, it has made a specialty of what might be called humanitarian preventive medicine. The origins of armed conflict and terrorism are complex, acknowledges CEO Keny-Guyer, but root



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Afton Walsh (left) and Susan Laarman discuss the progress of the planned action center. School groups will be a large part of the center's audience, but Mercy Corps also expects about a third of its visitors to be tourists.

causes such as poverty and hunger can be mitigated. Education also is crucial.

"To the degree that you offer positive pathways for young people that are looking for meaning in their lives, who might be tempted to explore more extremist ideologies or religious groups," Keny-Guyer says, "that also makes it less likely that they'll engage in negative or extreme behavior, or terrorist behavior."

No one's claiming that one or two Mercy Corps Action Centers alone are enough to eliminate terrorists like the ones that attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. But they help to answer a simple question posed by Keny-Guyer: "How can we all work together to build a better world, and maybe make it less likely that something like that ever happens again?"

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