



ABOVE & BELOW: Young adults from Nicaragua spend time in Virginia Beach with Whitt Sessoms and family. **RIGHT:** Team Center at Casa Bernabe Orphanage in Nicaragua.



For more information on the ORPHANetwork, visit www.orphanetwork.org.

ORPHANetwork

"If we didn't do it, nobody else would," shares a bottom line businessman from Virginia Beach. Whitt Sessoms, III offers his justification for supporting poverty-stricken children living outside the states. And as internet users visit the ORPHANetwork website, any criticism quickly fades. The non-profit organization, launched in 2000 and headquartered in Virginia Beach, assists kids who seek out shelter and better lives by turning to orphanages, outreach and feeding centers, and schools in areas lining the East and West coasts of Nicaragua.

"This effort, in my opinion, makes more of a difference in people's lives and the life of a country than anything else that I've been involved on," Sessoms recalls. "Nicaragua is the second poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, so there's a lot of oppressive poverty and oppressive heat for that matter, too."

Sessoms, of Cape Development & Real Estate Co., is more than a businessman to the ORPHANetwork, and especially to the organization's Program Director Tom Weiglein. Working with a staff of three people and the support of church communities, welcomed inspiration often bridges over the cultural divide and goes farther than money in the bank. But Weiglein doesn't hesitate to point out that every dollar counts.

"Our goal is to support the orphanages financially or any of our projects financially," he says. "There's actually three orphanages where we're working, and then there's three feeding centers that we're working with," which supply the children mainly with rice, beans, and more importantly, protein.

Weiglein's role in supporting the children of the

ORPHANetwork can be traced back to a mission trip for Spring Branch Community Church in Virginia Beach in 2002. The visit changed his life, shaking up his personal and professional compass.

"I saw poverty like I had never seen before, the poverty that really hits you hard," he remembers. The ORPHANetwork, founded by Spring Branch, persuaded him to join the group full time.

It didn't take long, however, for Weiglein to realize the organization needed strong financial wings to reach its goals, and he credits the churches and business leaders of Hampton Roads for keeping their eyes on the horizon. If people look far enough, they may see the end result of funding and team work. Whitt Sessoms calls it the Team Center, located at Casa Bernabe in Vera Cruz.

The facility opened up this year, housing the ORPHANetwork teams that visit the Casa Bernabe orphanage. The previous housing facility lacked international charm, which still provides vivid memories of the first trip over for Sessoms and his family.

He took action by joining together with a group of other local businessmen to construct the Team Center, complete with eight bedrooms and a large meeting center.

Sessoms and his family took their ORPHANetwork inspiration one step further recently and welcomed a young adult from Nicaragua into their Virginia Beach home. Neysi Gomez currently attends Old Dominion University and hopes to study architecture. He plans to take his academic skills and return back home to improve his own country.

"I just couldn't let that boy drop off into the abyss with as much talent, interest, enthusiasm, and wanting to succeed in life as he had," says Sessoms. **HRM**

—Jennifer Hoyt