



Gail Braccidiferno/Bruce MacDonald photo

Michael Geilenfeld, right, with some of his charges at orphanage he runs in Port-au-Prince, Haiti

From street urchins to minstrels

By Gail Braccidiferno
Special to The Day

Michael Geilenfeld sometimes jokingly refers to them as "mischievous misfits," but since March, the residents of Geilenfeld's orphanage in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, might better be called "mischievous minstrels."

Geilenfeld and his 21-member group have been touring the United States, presenting shows featuring native Haitian songs and a skit on

street life in the teeming capital city of the hemisphere's poorest country.

Riding in a converted school bus donated by a New Hampshire couple, the young Haitians have already given more than 75 performances in the Midwest and East, including Geilenfeld's native Iowa. They've raised \$36,000 for their efforts. They will travel from New Hampshire to Connecticut for three performances

in the next week, then head to New York, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Florida.

They will be hosted here by the Haitian Ministries Office of the Norwich Catholic Diocese. The boys will perform at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Gales Ferry on Thursday, St. Pius X in Middletown on Friday and Sacred Heart in Vernon next Sunday. Admission is free, but

donations are accepted.

Despite the length of the trip, the boys' enthusiasm has not waned. Geilenfeld said recently during an interview from Quincy, Mass. The tour has been full of surprises, ranging from chicken pox to a mechanical breakdown of the bus, from a blizzard in Iowa and a visit to Disney World to meeting the Haitian-American community in Dorchester, Mass.

One of the most touching experiences occurred while on a tour Haitian/C7

Haitian orphans arriving for 3 shows

From C1

of Quincy Market in Boston recently. The boys met four Haitian-American dishwashers who mustered a \$50 donation for the boys, an amount Geilenfeld said surprised them all. In Haiti, many peasants don't see that much cash in a year.

For one boy, the trip was literally a lifesaver. When the troupe arrived in Rochester, Minn. in April, the boy was ill and taken to a hospital. He was diagnosed as having a serious kidney infection and hospitalized 14 days, said Geilenfeld.

"If he had been in Haiti, he surely would have died," said Geilenfeld.

The incident is a graphic example of just how far the theatrical troupe, as improbable as any ever to take a bow before an American audience, is from the mean streets of Port-au-Prince and the children's jail, where many lived until Geilenfeld entered their lives.

Geilenfeld, who once worked with Mother Teresa's missionary organization, opened his first orphanage two years ago. He began taking in abandoned children, street urchins who roamed Port-au-Prince begging, stealing and struggling to stay alive.

In Haiti, staying alive is a national preoccupation not confined to children. More than half the country's adult population feel the effects of chronic malnutrition.

The boys Geilenfeld has taken in represent the lucky few. Restored to health, they live in a family setting, in which traditional religious values play an important role in their daily lives.

"We try to live like a regular family," said Geilenfeld. "This is not an institution."

In many respects, the boys are the same as youngsters throughout the world. They climb trees and push each other around. In times of trouble, they rally to offer assistance. One night last fall when two deaf boys among them failed to return home from school, the boys prayed for their lost friends, then joined adults in a search. And when a team of Belgian doctors determined the blind boy Noli would never see, the other boys seemed more disappointed than Noli himself.

Geilenfeld's home, which doubles as a guest house for visiting American church workers, is located off the Delmas Road, a major artery extending from the waterfront slums of La Saline to the cool, mountainside villas of Haiti's rich and powerful elite. Between the two extremes, Geilenfeld and his boys live on a quiet street.

The Iowa native opened his first home for boys in January 1985. He quickly outgrew the small house and moved to his present location a short while later. In recent months, he has opened a second home nearby.

The kitchen in the first house had no sink, just a drain pipe sticking out of the floor. The boys slept on mats on the floor, and the dining room doubled as the classroom.

Such conditions are not uncommon in the Caribbean nation that lies 700 miles south of Miami, where staggering human problems eclipse the island's natural beauty. The infant mortality rate is 113 per 1,000 births, 10 times higher than in the United States.

International relief agencies say half the children born in Haiti during a given year will die before their fifth birthday. Malnutrition and diarrhea claim many of the young.

Even those who survive childhood can't expect to live much beyond 50. More than half of the work force is unemployed or underemployed. The average yearly salary is just \$300.

In contrast to the bleak conditions outside, the home Geilenfeld calls St. Joseph's is full of hope and promise. New boys are greeted with an inspirational song and gifts. The food is simple, but nutritious, and the warmth of a family atmosphere is evident to the first-time visitor. The din of afternoon play time gives way to evening chores and a group prayer before the boys are allowed to watch television.

Geilenfeld began his work with the young in 1974 as a member of the Brothers of Charity, a group founded by Mother Teresa, who won a 1979 Nobel Peace Prize for her work among the destitute in Calcutta, India.

Among the first men to join the order, Geilenfeld worked in Los Angeles, Cambodia, El Salvador and India, as well as Haiti.

He left the order after deciding he would like to offer the homeless something more than shelter and food. He wanted to provide those necessities and a home setting as well. He chose Haiti for his experiment because that's where he had the most contacts, and he spoke Creole, the language in Haiti.

"I felt it was the place for me to go," he noted.

In the nearly two years he has operated his home, Geilenfeld said he has assisted 48 boys. Most of them come from the youth detention center, a dreary government-run institution where children are confined when found begging or walking the streets barefoot or in ragged clothing.

"I look for boys who are 8 to 11 years old and have not been visited by anyone for quite a long time," he said. "I have to make sure they fit into a structure with guests."

"I was the only one who ever took kids out of there," he said of the detention center. "Everyone was always taking kids into the center."

Most of the boys at St. Joseph's came from the rural area outside of the Haitian capital. Because of the extreme poverty in Haiti, some rural families purposely "lose" children in Port-au-Prince's crowded outdoor markets. It's one less mouth to feed.

"Older boys who have been on the streets longer won't adapt well to this environment," said Geilenfeld of the structured life at St. Joseph's. He does try to provide some aid and encouragement to older boys, however.

He helps set them up in their own homes, generally shared by a couple of boys, and helps them find work and manage their money. Rent for the small huts where most of them live runs about \$70 a year.

Once a job is found, the boys must deposit \$5 a month into a bank account administered by Geilenfeld. They can have no withdrawals for a year then must maintain a minimum balance equal to about six months rent, he said.

Geilenfeld helps in other ways, too. On Sundays, he opens St. Joseph's to all homeless boys. They are invited in for a day of treats, allowed to watch television or participate in games. They leave with a small gift such as a bar of soap or a comb.

He also contributes to the whole community. He receives regular donations of food from various charities and distributes it to families living near St. Joseph's and, through a local pastor, to other orphanages and needy families in the slums.

In addition to teaching the young members of his extended family how to survive in a hostile world, Geilenfeld tries to place some of the boys temporarily in American homes. He believes the period of American education will make them more productive when they return home.

Geilenfeld said the troupe has already raised enough money on its U.S. tour to pay off the orphanage mortgage. Other donations will be used to buy and convert land adjoining St. Joseph's to a soccer field and playground.

Supported by donations from the United States and revenue from his guest house, Geilenfeld feels he has only begun to carry out his life's work of caring for the young and abandoned.

Gail Braccidiferno, a former Day staff reporter, and her husband spent two months last year in Haiti, where they met Michael Geilenfeld.