

Ex-Iowan is Haiti's Pied Piper

Operator of orphanage for boys taking troupe on tour of U.S.

By GAIL BRACCIDIFERRO
and BRUCE MACDONALD

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 are expected to give upward of 50 performances before the tour ends in Connecticut in June.

The boys, who have performed in Geilenfeld's hometown of Algona, Ia., and are now touring in Minnesota, will return to Iowa April 26 to give shows in the Cedar Rapids, Oelwein and Waterloo areas. They will leave Iowa again May 3, heading east to Pennsylvania.

The theatrical troupe, as improbable as any ever to take a bow before an American audience, is a long way 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.

Geilenfeld's lucky few

In Haiti, staying alive is a national preoccupation not confined to children. More than half the country's adult population feels the effect 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.

Geilenfeld's home, which also 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 Salento to the mountainside villas of Haiti's rich and powerful elite.

Between the two extremes, Geilenfeld and his boys live on a quiet side street.

The former Algona resident 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.

High rate of infant mortality

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. Infant mortality rates are put at 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 the 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 knew Creole, the language spoken there.

"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 they are found begging or walking the streets barefoot or in raggedy clothing.

"I look for boys who are 8 to 11 years old and

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Michael Geilenfeld takes time to play a game with some youngsters in their Haitian home.

Haitians leave a big impression with Iowans

By JIM POLLOCK

Register Staff Writer

Three things about Iowa particularly impressed the members of Michael Geilenfeld's traveling show during their first swing through the state: (1) The snowstorm they encountered in Carroll; (2) the wide-open spaces; and (3) the bicycles of Algona.

"They would go up to people and ask if they could ride their bicycles," Geilenfeld said with a laugh. "They didn't understand that the bikes outside the school belonged to people; they thought they were for anybody to use. We had a little trouble with that."

"They just took Algona by storm."

So when the bus rolled north from Algona for the Minnesota portion of this four-month tour, it bore a souvenir sticker that read: "Iowa Survived Our Visit—Can You?"

Actually, Iowa and the visiting Haitian boys reportedly enjoyed each other's company earlier this month. They met again next week, when Geilenfeld's group visits Marion, Cedar Rapids, Oelwein and Waterloo to perform its variety show.

At Garrigan High School in Algona, where Geilenfeld graduated in 1970, about 1,300 people turned out to watch the show. At St. Cecilia's Church there, the offering took in \$2,000 that will go to help the Geilenfeld's orphanage in Haiti, according to Father Tom Nash.

In Sioux City, Heelan High School superin-

tendent Father Victor Ramaeker said, "Our students came away a good deal more grateful" after seeing slides of the Port-au-Prince slums.

"One sophomore girl was going to have her mom come pick her up, but after seeing all that she said she guessed she could take the bus."

"A lot of children have responded positively, a lot of prejudices have been dropped," said Geilenfeld, speaking from Rochester, Minn.

The members of his Haitian "family" have benefited, too, he said. "I call this 'resurrection theater' because these boys have always had a low self-image, and this attention and approval lifts them up."

When they are asked what they like best about the United States, "They always say 'the people,'" Geilenfeld said. However, they've also been exposed to open spaces, electronic gadgets, cars everywhere, and the practice of constant snacking, he pointed out. "I'm concerned about their re-entry to Haiti," he said. "They're being bombarded with so much, and it's the first time they've had anything to compare their lives with."

That includes the snowstorm that hit while the boys were staying with families in and around Carroll. "It frightened them at first, but snow was one of the things they wanted to see, so that was perfect," Geilenfeld said. "However, they all agreed they are glad it doesn't snow in Haiti."

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Some rural families 'lose' kids on purpose

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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 dona-

tions 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 is hoping his current U.S. tour will raise some or all of the \$20,000 he figures it will take to buy and convert land adjoining St. Joseph's to a soccer field and playground.

The trip is also proving to be quite an adventure for the boys. They visited Disney World, experienced cold for the first time, rode on horses and snowmobiles and were even caught in a snowstorm in Carroll, Ia.

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