



Building capacity builds hope, opportunity for people in need



Photo: IOCC-Belgrade

Refugee women living in Kragujevac, Serbia, participate in a handicraft workshop sponsored by Nebo ("Sky"), a local non-profit organization supported by IOCC. Through its partnership with IOCC, Nebo is able to provide essential services to people displaced by the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia.

Kragujevac, Serbia (IOCC) —

When Ana and her family became refugees in 1995, they left at a moment's notice, taking only their clothing and some family photos.

They figured they would be gone for only a few weeks, but they soon learned that the army destroyed all the homes in their part of town. They made their way to Kragujevac, an auto-manufacturing center south of Serbia's capital, Belgrade, because they had heard that other people from their town had settled there.

When they arrived in Kragujevac,

250 miles from home, nobody seemed to notice.

Ana, 64, a widowed retiree, and her family were part of a flood of refugees who poured into Kragujevac in the 1990s, displaced by the wars in the former Yugoslavia. As many as 20,000 of the 175,000 residents in this city are waiting to go home. Most have found temporary shelter in private homes, while the remainder lives in crowded refugee centers.

Ana and her family — her son, Jovan, 36, his wife, Branka, 34, and their three young children — were initially placed in a refugee shelter: a former high school gymnasium that was partitioned into improvised rooms by hanging wool blankets. Seeing that many of their neighbors had been in the center for years, Ana and her family decided to leave.

Jovan found odd jobs around town which, combined with the meager proceeds from selling smuggled cigarettes on the gray market, was just enough to rent a home for \$50 a month. Now the six of them live

in a small house on the outskirts of Kragujevac. They thought that life there would be easier than in the refugee shelter, but it is not.

Every day brings a new worry: How will they buy food, clothing and diapers and still pay their bills? Going back to their hometown isn't an option — even if they could rebuild their home, the environment there is hostile, and they know they wouldn't be safe.

But slowly, things have been changing for Ana and her family.

For the last year, Ana has been visiting a small community center in her neighborhood. The center, operated by a volunteer group named Nebo ("Sky"), provides a number of services and activities that Ana finds useful: lectures, crafts, basic medical services, counseling and physical therapy.

When Ana first visited Nebo, she was self-conscious and concerned: What if people laughed at her accent? What if they asked her to pay something? What if refugees weren't eligible for help?

Fortunately, she was made to feel welcome. Best of all, there were some people from her former hometown there, and she found herself trading news and laughing like she hadn't in a long time. Now Ana returns to the Nebo office almost every day.

They often have workshops for refugees of all ages that help them deal with the emotional difficulty of life in a new home. Three times a week, they

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From the Executive Director



Photo: IOCC-Moscow

I joined IOCC ten years ago with the belief and understanding that we would work with and through the Orthodox Church and local partners worldwide; helping them help themselves. That we would work to fight against poverty, feed the hungry, help those who were sick, to give people dignity and hope. We have stayed true to our mission. We have reached tens of thousands of people. However, we have not been alone.

The work of relief and development organizations such as IOCC has to be done in concert with partners — volunteers, donors, government agencies, foundations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Over the years, IOCC partners have been an integral part of its mission.

The ability to partner with others is best expressed in our work with NGOs in the countries where we work. These agencies serve a variety of needs in their communities but often need help with training, gaining experience and finding funding.

In this issue of News & Needs, you will read about IOCC's most recent efforts to build the capacity of local organizations to strengthen their communities. In the Holy

Land, IOCC has built up an extensive network of local partners through which we are able to bring hope and opportunity to dozens of isolated, rural villages. In the former Yugoslavia, IOCC has enabled dozens of organizations to assist with the work of refugee return and post-war reconciliation. And in the United States, IOCC is working to strengthen a number of Orthodox charitable initiatives.

I'm convinced that such partnerships are the best way to do humanitarian work. They lead to locally-appropriate solutions that are sustainable over the long term, and they provide a way for participants to take "ownership" of their communities.

One of the original goals of IOCC was to build the capacity of the Orthodox Church worldwide to be an active participant in relief and development. In every country where IOCC works, the Church is an integral partner in this work of philanthropy. The teaching of the Orthodox Church is that this work is not an option: It is the calling of all Christians. Church-related NGOs such as Covekoljublje ("Philanthropy") in Serbia, Diakonia Agapes ("Service of Love") in Albania, and Lazarus in the Republic of Georgia, demonstrate Orthodoxy in action, engaged with modern problems and answering Christ's call to serve the neighbor.

As IOCC enters its second decade, these partnerships, whether big or small, will continue to bear fruit in ways that bring "God's gifts of food, shelter, economic self-sufficiency and hope" to those in need throughout the world. Thank you for joining our partnership. As we enter Great Lent, let us take some time to reflect on this common mission and rededicate ourselves to carrying it out.

In Christ,

Constantine M. Triantafilou
Executive Director



International Orthodox Christian Charities, Inc. (IOCC) was established in 1992 by the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA) as the official humanitarian aid agency of Orthodox Christians to work in cooperation with the Orthodox Churches worldwide.

The mission of IOCC is to respond to the call of our Lord Jesus Christ, to minister to those who are suffering and are in need throughout the world, sharing with them God's gifts of food, shelter, economic self-sufficiency and hope.

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recycled paper

Refugee sponsorship a 'natural' for Orthodox parishes in the U.S.

By The Rev. Aris Metrakos

Columbia, S.C. (IOCC) — At the beginning of the third millennium of Christianity, Orthodoxy has emerged as a prominent part of the American religious landscape. The move from the cultural ghetto into the mainstream of the country's religious life has challenged Orthodox parishes to reach into their surrounding communities in order to engage in social mission.

But finding ways to do this is not always easy. As late-comers to the world of social outreach, many Orthodox churches are struggling with this aspect of the gospel.

Is there a social mission niche that can be filled by Orthodox parishes? I believe refugee sponsorship is just such a mission.

An opportunity for refugee sponsorship was made available recently to Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in Columbia, S.C. Lutheran Family Services in the Carolinas (the agency that handles refugee resettlement in Columbia) had contacted Robert Pianka, director of IOCC's U.S. Program, about the case of Branko Matic (not his real name).

A Bosnian Serb who had been a refugee for a decade, Branko was to be resettled in Columbia. Lutheran Family Services wanted very much for an Orthodox parish to sponsor Branko. After Robert's call to Holy Trinity, the parish established a refugee task force to oversee the sponsoring of Branko. Among those serving on the task force were the church's Serbian faithful.

Refugee sponsorship is neither complicated nor cost prohibitive. Sponsoring parishes are asked to meet the refugee at the airport on his arrival, find the refugee a place to live

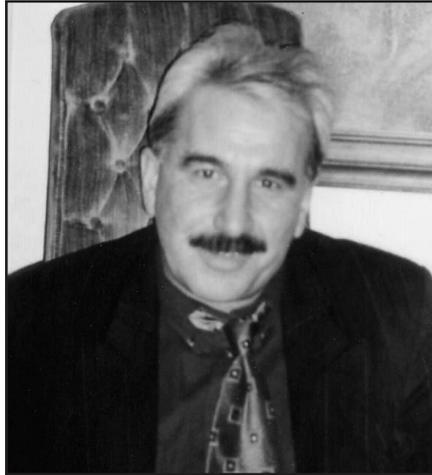


Photo: Mary Rickman

Branko Matic, a refugee from Bosnia-Herzegovina, was sponsored by a Greek Orthodox parish in Columbia, S.C., with the help of IOCC's U.S. Program. The U.S. Program is working to make refugee sponsorship a regular feature of Orthodox parish life in the United States.

and assist him in gaining employment, learning English and dealing with government agencies.

It is expected that the typical refugee will be self-sufficient within three months and that the nominal expenditure by a parish would be between \$1,000 and \$1,500. Often, refugees come not as individuals but as part of nuclear family that becomes the responsibility of the parish.

Sponsorship of Branko has been atypical in some respects. Beaten by his captors during the Bosnian war, he has several lingering medical conditions that include a semi-crippling back injury. As such, Branko's medical status must be evaluated before he can start looking for a job. That medical evaluation cannot be accomplished until he receives his eligibility for Medicaid.

Branko is not wasting his time as he waits for work. He studies English four hours a day using interactive computer software. A tutor helps him

with his new language two hours a week, and Branko participates in a conversational group one evening a week. Helping Branko learn English has educated the Holy Trinity parish with regard to the needs of non-English speaking immigrants and to the resources available for teaching English-as-a-second-language.

The parish has learned that helping foreign-born members gain greater facility in English is a vocation that can be easily answered by America's multi-ethnic Orthodox churches.

The parish prays that Branko's medical condition can be corrected. Short of this, it is hoped that this former chemical engineer will be placed eventually in a work situation that accommodates his disability while helping him achieve self-sufficiency and independence.

In the meantime, he already has a sense of belonging in his newfound parish, and he has given that parish family a precious gift: a way to do social mission that is unique, tangible and satisfying.

I encourage any parish that is interested in refugee sponsorship to do what I did: Contact U.S. Program Director Robert Pianka at 1-877-803-IOCC.

Editor's note: Since this essay was written, Branko received his Medicaid card and started physical therapy, leading to "dramatic improvements," according to Fr. Aris. Branko also has decided to move to Chicago, where he will live with relatives. He already has found a job. Such "secondary migrations" are common in refugee sponsorship cases. Fr. Aris said the parish will be seeing Branko off soon. "I think it worked out marvelously," he said.

Fr. Aris is pastor of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in Columbia, S.C.



‘Mentor Mothers’ help orphans find their way home

By Nicholas Chakos — IOCC-Bucharest

Bucharest, Romania (IOCC) — When the curtain of communism was pulled back from Romania in 1989, the world was shocked to learn of the condition of orphans living in government-run institutions. Reportedly, 110,000 children were living in squalor — sometimes chained to beds, playing with broken glass and often too malnourished to walk.

Although the situation of Romania’s orphanages has improved since 1989, it is still in a terrible state. Approximately 43,000 children currently live in orphanages where they receive limited basic care, almost no schooling and none of the nurturing stability that comes with having a family.

Despite the high number of children living in institutions, very few of them are actually orphans. Eighty-six percent of all children in Romania’s orphanages have at least one parent still alive. These children have been abandoned because of the economic hardships faced by their parents and families.

IOCC is one of the most active organizations in Romania working to prevent child abandonment and helping children make the transition from state-run orphanages to stable, loving homes.

As part of a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) program, IOCC and the Romanian Orthodox Church are seeking to reduce the number of children living in orphanages by 50 percent. In addition, the partners are working to reduce the number of current aban-

donment cases by 90 percent. The project covers the counties of Dolj, Gorj and Mehedinti.

These are very ambitious goals, but IOCC’s program, based on building the capacity of communities that surround abandoned children and their families, has been showing steady progress.

Using methods that address the root causes of abandoning children, the IOCC team first works with families in order to help them become economically stable so that they are able to take their children back into their homes. By providing the families with job skills and some temporary material assistance, IOCC is helping these families reclaim their children.

However, this is just the beginning. IOCC realizes that the communities surrounding poor families who have abandoned their children have the greatest potential for providing long-term solutions. The problems of families and abandoned children can be addressed by increasing the capacity of communities to support these families in crisis.

To this end, IOCC and the Orthodox Church have established more than 30 community-support groups that are helping to identify families at-risk of abandoning their children. Also, these groups help counsel and support families that have reintegrated abandoned children into their families.

One of the main activities of these support groups is to identify and encourage mothers who have not abandoned a child, but who have

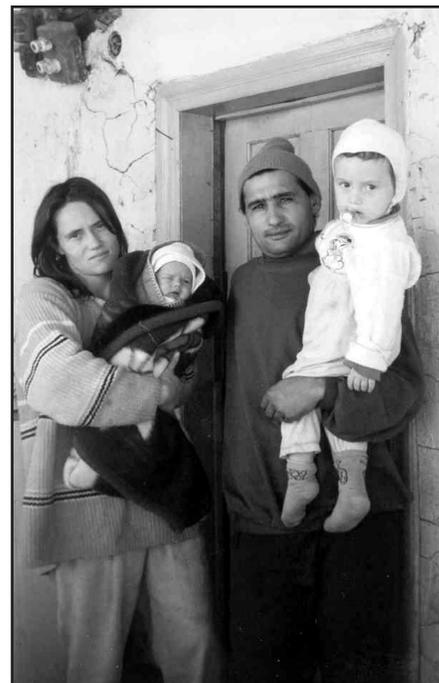


Photo: IOCC-Bucharest

This family participates in one of IOCC’s community support groups as mentors. The husband and wife, who have managed to keep and provide for their children despite economic hardships, work with couples who are considered at risk of abandoning their children.

experienced the same or similar life difficulties as mothers who have abandoned a child, to share their experiences and coping strategies as a mentor to parents and families who are reintegrating or adopting children. These “Mentor Mothers” are an important part of the help provided to struggling families and have proven to be an innovative and effective tool in fighting child abandonment.

In six months of work, IOCC has successfully reintegrated more than 90 children with their families. Each month, new community support groups are being created, and after receiving intensive training, they become vital networks of assistance to anyone who needs it.



Building capacity builds hope, opportunity

(continued from page 1)



Photo: Nils Carstensen - ACT

A Serbian refugee couple from Croatia sit in their “room” inside a refugee center in Kragujevac, Serbia, where IOCC has been delivering assistance with its partner Philanthropy, the humanitarian arm of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Such partnerships are critical to the relief and development programs IOCC implements in the former Yugoslavia.

provide materials for handicrafts, like knitting, which helps Ana and her friends keep physically and socially active. From time to time, a doctor visits to provide basic health checks, and in the winter she received a winter coat and warm pajamas. Everything was free.

Ana’s local priest knows that her family, like so many in Kragujevac, is barely making ends meet. Although there are few resources he can draw upon to help her, he’s added her to a list for the distribution of food parcels by Philanthropy, the humanitarian aid agency of the Serbian Orthodox Church. A food parcel contains flour, sugar, oil, dried fruit and other basics — enough to supplement the family’s meals for a month.

Ana and her family are only vaguely aware that Nebo is part of a network of 25 similar agencies that provide services to more than 11,000 seniors throughout Serbia. As part of that project, IOCC has provided Nebo with a six-month grant, which allows

it to offer the services that Ana and her family have received.

Similarly, Philanthropy is distributing food to 8,000 refugees in four urban areas in Serbia, including Kragujevac. IOCC is providing these parcels (valued at \$130,000) to Philanthropy for distribution to refugees.

IOCC not only provides Nebo and Philanthropy with funds and materials to assist Ana and so many others; it also trains their staffs so they will become more effective in their work. Nebo participates in regularly scheduled coordination meetings and training seminars. To receive its grant, it was required to develop and submit a completed proposal to IOCC, following an IOCC workshop on program development.

Philanthropy has been IOCC’s main partner in Serbia since 1992, and part of IOCC’s mission there is to help Philanthropy develop its institutional skills. This process is called capacity building.

These partnerships are central to IOCC’s work in Serbia and throughout the world.

When you visit Ana with IOCC’s field staff to see how she’s doing, she greets you with a smile and invites you in for a cup of coffee — even though it’s an extravagant offer, she wants to be a good hostess. She’s happy to talk about Nebo’s work and the food parcels she receives from Philanthropy.

Ana doesn’t understand exactly how these projects came into being; if you ask her who is helping her, she’ll just say, “Our Church — our people.” She’s happy about the change in her life and is happy to be occupied with a few more pleasant thoughts.

Even so, she’s realistic about the future and looks into the distance when she considers it. “It’s hard,” she says. “I don’t know how we’ll get by. But what can you do? Somehow we’ll have to manage.”



‘Genesis’ gives new beginning to war-traumatized children

Banja Luka, Bosnia-Herzegovina (IOCC) — At 12 and 15, Goran and Simo have been through more trauma than most children their age.

They lost their father in the Bosnian war of 1992-1995. Their mother has since remarried. Their grandfather, overwhelmed with guilt for pressuring their father to join the army, attempted suicide.

Both boys continue to suffer because of the war-related trauma and their family instability. Goran has amnesia, among other problems, and Simo has speech and attention-deficit disorders.

They are two among many young people in Bosnia-Herzegovina who show the lingering emotional and mental scars of war and displacement. Children witnessed violence and destruction, lost parents or other family members, and were forced from their homes into strange, hostile surroundings.

In 1996, noticing these destructive, long-term effects on children, a group of volunteers in Banja Luka, Bosnia-Herzegovina, formed the Genesis Project to address the needs of war-traumatized children and young people in their communities.

In partnership with IOCC, the Genesis Project set up a program of psycho-social support for children in the under-served, eastern region of Republika Srpska. The goal was to help children who, during and after the war, experienced the pain of exile, violence (as witness or victim), the loss of a parent or loved one, the destruction of their home, or other traumas which interrupt the stability and security of children's lives.

Goran and Simo enrolled in the program, receiving both group and individual counseling. After a year, they were ready to leave the Genesis program.

“During that period, they became more



Photos: IOCC - Banja Luka

Children in Bosnia-Herzegovina continue to suffer the lingering effects of war and displacement. In partnership with IOCC, non-profit organizations in Bosnia are responding to those needs by offering educational, social and counseling services to war-traumatized children. Here, children from Mrkonjic Grad, Bosnia, participate in an art class led by the IOCC partner “Eskim.”

open. They started to talk about their father, which was taboo for them before,” said Mark Ohanian, IOCC head-of-office in Bosnia. “They started to express their emotions and to openly exchange their feelings with their mother and other members in their group.”

Even with these successes, Genesis has had to cope with a lack of trust from local authorities and a lack of understanding from the surrounding community. It also has earned the gratitude of those who have been helped, whose needs they have met and understood.

The partnership between IOCC and Genesis began the same year Genesis was formed. The relationship between the two organizations continues to be one of mutual respect and trust. To date, IOCC has awarded five grants to Genesis totaling \$50,000.

One of the largest projects that Genesis has implemented is called “Let’s Color Dreams,” through which it has offered group and individual counseling to more than 300 boys and girls, ages 6 to 16.

Because of IOCC’s support, Genesis was able to extend the level, and diversify the nature, of its services and assistance to the beneficiaries of “Let’s Color Dreams.”

Genesis’ strategy for assisting war-traumatized children includes the use of therapeutic games, therapeutic activities involving art (paintings/drawings), music, literature, drama and film, and outdoor activities such as field trips and picnics.

So far, Genesis has reached encouraging results with children who survived war and displacement. Its research has shown that the wounds of war heal more easily if the child receives adequate support and unconditional acceptance from others, and if they are welcomed into their new living environment.

Genesis, supported by IOCC, has helped children like Goran and Simo overcome their traumatic experiences and face the prospects of a brighter future.

This article was written by IOCC’s Civil Society team in Bosnia-Herzegovina.



‘Home’ is where the heart is for Beita Charitable Society

By Pascalis “Lee” Papouras — IOCC-Jerusalem



Photo: Nora Kort - IOCC

Children (above) from the West Bank village of Beita enjoy attending the kindergarten operated by the Beita Charitable Society, an IOCC partner. They are pictured here with the school principal and board members.

An IOCC project officer (below, second from right) helps women from the West Bank village of Beita start a puppet project at the village community center. Once complete, the puppets can be used to tell traditional stories at the Beita kindergarten. The project is part of a larger program of handicraft training being implemented by IOCC to help Palestinian women earn much-needed extra income for their families.



Photo: Azam Mousa - IOCC

Beita, West Bank (IOCC) — My colleagues and I breathed a sigh of relief when we realized there were no soldiers at the checkpoints on the way to Beita. Even with the proper permits, it is often difficult to travel the West Bank since the military closures started almost a year ago.

We were on our way to the village to continue with our IOCC program activities. Beita, a name meaning “our home” in Aramaic, is a relatively large village (population: 7,000) in the flat plain south of Nablus. The people there are descendants of the Aramaeans; their village’s history is told through the synchronous story of its five native clans.

IOCC has been working in cooperation with the Beita community for several years, most recently on a job creation project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Because of the constant closures in the West Bank, the Beita Charitable Society, our local counterpart, has taken responsibility for many aspects of this project.

On this particular day, the Society’s leaders were there to greet us with warm smiles and hot brewed country tea, the two things necessary to fight the chilly, dry winters of the Holy Land.

We sat down and talked — not about politics or war, but about olives. With a sigh, they explained about the rising oil-pressing costs, the higher cost of living and the lower market value of their olive products. After an impressive recitation of statistics, Bassim Jaghoub, a member of the Society, apologized to me with a laugh. “We are still very much farmers in spirit, even though many of us became dependent on various trades and labors,” he said.

I was surprised that after two years of the continuing intifada (“uprising”) they could remain so upbeat. When I asked them about the current situation, they said that even though there has been an awakening of patriotism among Palestinians, there has been a decline in strong extended family ties — truly a tragedy for this traditional community.

These family ties and close relations were the impetus for the establishment of the Beita Charitable Society in 1972. The first chairman described the organization’s motivation for charitable work with the words, “So that love may flow like a broad river.” The Society’s original programs included adult literacy — illiteracy has dropped from 50 percent

to 5 percent — a kindergarten and a health clinic. They originally relied on their own contributions and those of émigrés from the village. But with a large number of programs covering a variety of issues, the relationship with IOCC came at a perfect moment.

In partnership, they have opened their first public library, which houses a humble but growing collection of books, as well as a computer lab and a health education program for women. Through a project supported by the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, these women have become health trainers throughout the region.

Now, with the USAID-IOCC program, the Society has completed construction of another floor for its office building; built agricultural roads that lead to olive groves; and trained people in such areas as construction trades and traditional embroidery.

The current vice resident, Adnan Araj, explained what development he envisions for the future: the construction of a building and work center for the Women’s Committee, which is 300 members strong, and the establishment of a computer training center.

The Society also has facilitated IOCC’s emergency humanitarian aid throughout the northern West Bank, and will provide contingency support for the villages in the Jenin and Nablus districts in times of future crisis. In short, the Beita Charitable Society has been a catalyst for rural development throughout the area.

Through these projects, the Society has increased its capacity for helping its neighbors and is attempting to increase the standard of living in this troubled region.



Supporters find new ways to partner with IOCC

Photo courtesy of Jim Angelus



IOCC supporters Jim and Sally Gabriel at a "Race to Respond" event in Price, Utah, last August. The Gabriels recently donated a used car to IOCC. The vehicle donation program is one of several new ways through which people are advancing the mission of IOCC.

Jim Gabriel of Centerport, N.Y., decided he'd seen enough of his 1995 Chrysler LeBaron. "It had 105,000 miles on it. I drove the car 80 miles each day to work," said Gabriel, who lives on Long Island and works in Manhattan.

Then Gabriel had an idea. Instead of selling or trading in the car, he'd donate it to charity. But to whom? He thought of IOCC because of the cross-country cycling event it held in August 2002. "I was amazed at what I saw last summer and what I learned about IOCC — the amazing good that IOCC does," he said. "This is a good way to give a significant donation to IOCC at relatively little cost to yourself."

Gabriel's brother-in-law, Jim Angelus, was the leader of the five-man cycling team for the IOCC benefit ride, which raised nearly \$250,000 in support of IOCC's work. The event rallied IOCC volunteers and supporters from across the country to participate in IOCC's mission in a tangible way.

"I'd just like to think that the 'Race to Respond' is not over. It's going to continue," Angelus said on the final day of the event. That sentiment has been kept alive by other IOCC supporters like Costa Panos from Atlanta, Ga.

As co-chairman of the Third Annual

Atlanta 5K Run/Walk (April 5, 2003), Panos, along with other members of the Atlanta Metropolitan Committee, is gathering the Orthodox community together in support of IOCC. "Of all the things the Orthodox Church has done in America, IOCC is one of the best because it is a pan-Orthodox effort. It is all Orthodox coming together to help one organization, regardless of background."

The Atlanta event is expected to attract more than 100 participants from local Orthodox parishes as well as the greater Atlanta community. Speaking on behalf of the event committee, Panos added, "I guess this is our stewardship in a way — time, talent and treasure. By participating in an event like this, people are... putting energy, time and effort into something that will help those in need."

The Atlanta committee is also directly involved with IOCC's U.S. Program, participating in an emergency food program called "Loaves & Fishes." The group plans to work with IOCC in implementing its ESL

(English as a Second Language) initiative, offering language instruction to recent immigrants through local Orthodox parishes.

Where volunteer committees are not present, supporters have found other ways to participate in IOCC's work.

A growing number of people are supporting IOCC through memorial and honor donations, which can be given in lieu of gifts for baptisms, birthdays, or even weddings. Similarly, families have asked for contributions to be given to IOCC in memory of a loved one instead of flowers or cards.

Whether through vehicle donations, honorary gifts or community events, supporters are finding new ways to support the work of IOCC. Panos is quick to point out, "You're (doing this) for an organization that you should be proud of because it's your organization, your charity."

Information about IOCC events and alternate giving opportunities can be found on IOCC's Web site, www.iocc.org, or by calling IOCC toll-free 877-803-4622.



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