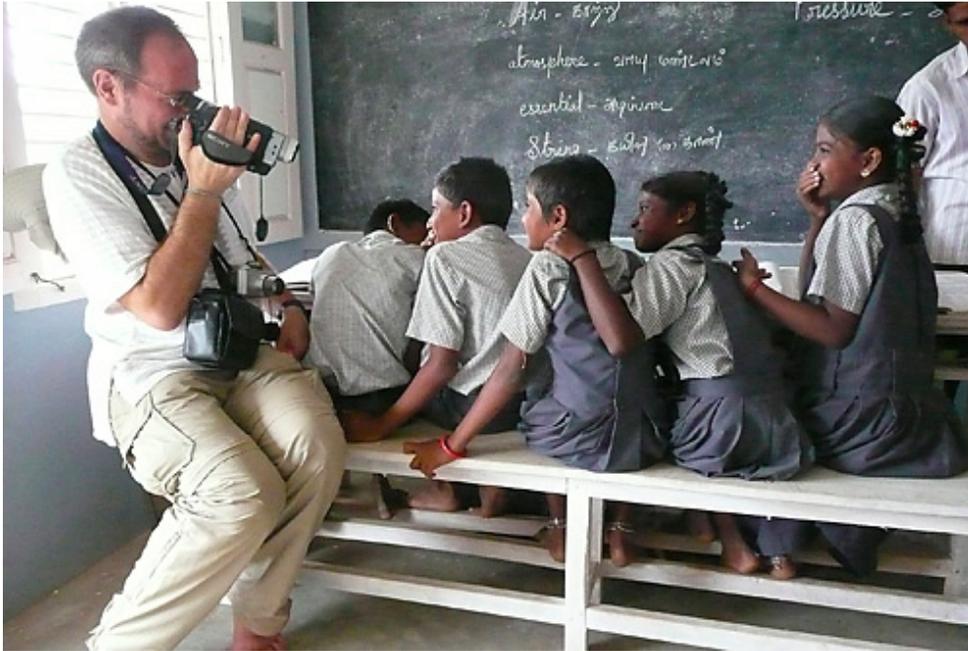


September 19, 2011 | Posted by [Tom Sakash](#)

Sahaya International sends hope across the globe



Sahaya International founder Koen Van Rompay films students at the Mother Teresa School in Andimadam, India, for an upcoming documentary about the village and the work his organization has done there. Courtesy photo

Many people in impoverished countries who are afflicted with AIDS don't have the means to combat the disease by themselves.

So 15 years ago, Koen Van Rompay, a research scientist at the California National Primate Research

Center on the UC Davis campus, decided to do something about that.

When he first traveled to India in 1997, the conditions he encountered overwhelmed him.

“Seeing it first-hand, seeing children begging on the street, families living on the street taking water from the gutter to wash their faces, it was just really shocking,” Van Rompay said.

“I felt very frustrated because, look, here I am in Davis doing research at the University of California trying to do something about HIV/AIDS but yet these people have so many other problems they have to face every day.”

Following an AIDS conference in Chennai, India, in 1997, Van Rompay traveled to Andimadam, a remote village south of the city, at the invitation of Durai Selvam, a man he met at the conference. Selvam had established a small organization called Rural Education and Action Development, which aimed to help sick children in the area.

Van Rompay was struck by how much more help the village needed. He vowed he would help in any way he could.

He brought back hand-embroidered greeting cards that village members had made and sold

them in the States for donations of \$1 apiece. In one year, he had doubled READ's budget.

Two years later, Van Rompay founded Sahaya International, a nonprofit organization designed to support AIDS-affected children in India, and partnered with READ.

Since that partnership began in 1999, the agencies have built two brand-new schools, created self-help groups for women to start their own businesses and founded trade schools for villagers to learn skills valuable in the Indian job market.

Most importantly, though, they have saved hundreds of young lives.

"I sponsor one kid who is a survivor of AIDS," said Ramin Yazdani, a volunteer at Sahaya International. "He's been taking medication since he was 8 years old and he's 18 now and going to college. He got AIDS from birth, but he's been able to survive it and live a normal life."

Sahaya and READ also focus on HIV/AIDS education for the villages. They train as many people in and around Andimadam as they can with the hope that they will teach others about the dangers of the disease.

Back in the States, many Davis residents contribute to Sahaya International's orphan sponsorship program, supporting more than 200 children by sending about \$30 each month. The money pays for medication, school and other social programs for the kids.

Yazdani said the organization's success is largely a product of Van Rompay's efforts.

"Koen does a great job of getting everyone excited and energized to help," Yazdani said. "The organization is pretty small, but it's effective."

Sahaya International's modest size actually has helped its cause. Since the organization is run completely by volunteers, it has no overhead, which assures that 100 percent of the funds raised go directly to the children.

The organization has now expanded to other countries in need of support. Over the past few years, Sahaya International has opened facilities in Africa, the Philippines and Sri Lanka.

Although the organization has made improvements in many places, it still needs more support from anyone willing to give it. In Davis, there are several opportunities for people interested in helping out to contribute.

On Sunday, Oct. 9, Sahaya will host its fifth annual Sahaya Walks event to raise money and awareness for children in India with AIDS. Van Rompay, a 22-year Davis resident, hopes people will register for the walk and come out in support.

"We really want to make people realize how easy it is to make a difference," he said.

The event will begin at 2 p.m. with a brief opening ceremony at the First Baptist Church of Davis, 38141 Russell Blvd.

Volunteers and others interested in Sahaya's work are invited to a pre-walk potluck at 6 p.m.

Saturday at International House, Davis, 10 College Park.

“I think if more people in Davis knew about Sahaya, they would be excited,” said Elisabeth Sherwin, a Sahaya sponsor and executive director of I-House. “It’s just sometimes hard to get the word out. ... The walk is very important just because it demonstrates our commitment to other people.”

Last year’s walk raised \$5,917, despite inclement weather.

Those interested in the events can register online at www.firstgiving.com/sahayainternational/sahayawalks.

Those who can’t attend either event but still wish to contribute can create a fund-raising page at www.firstgiving.com/sahayainternational/sahayawalks.

There, anyone can share Sahaya’s efforts with friends and family in order to get the word out about the organization and its mission.

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