

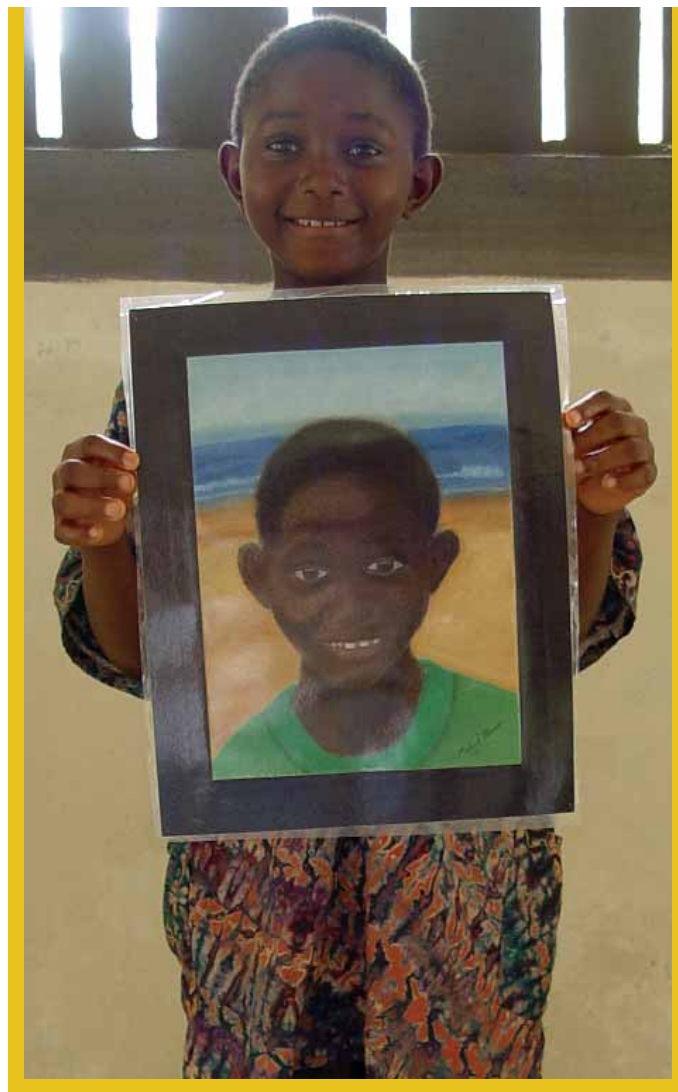


PORTRAITS OF COMPASSION

MANY PEOPLE OPEN THEIR WALLETS WHEN FACED WITH THE STARK REALITY OF ORPHANED CHILDREN AROUND THE GLOBE. BUT ONE UW GRADUATE DOES MORE THAN SEND MONEY — HE MAILS MEMORIES.

BY ERIN HUEFFNER '00

Above: Ben Schumaker, who founded the Memory Project, is also an artist who has joined high school volunteers in painting portraits of orphans to provide them with mementos of their childhoods. The photos on the following pages depict children from an orphanage in Sierra Leone.



When his art teacher asked for volunteers to paint portraits of children last spring, Tom Muto readily agreed. It would just be one more assignment to take care of, he reasoned. He had dabbled in art classes all through high school, and usually, like most high school seniors, his greatest concern was how the quality of his work would affect his grade. But as his portrait of a little girl began to take shape, the Wolcott, New York, student found himself worrying more about whether she would like it.

"Everyone worked harder on [the portraits] than they did with any other project," he says. "Giving them to someone else, we wanted them to be a lot nicer."

And he *really* wanted the girl to like the picture. She's an orphan, and Muto's painting would be more than her portrait. It would be one of her only possessions.

Muto was among a thousand high school students across the country working on the Memory Project, a program founded by social entrepreneur Ben Schumaker '03 to make a difference for forgotten children. His mission is touching the lives of orphans around the world who have nothing and no one to call their own. If not for a chance encounter with a

young man in Guatemala, however, Schumaker might never have found his calling.

After graduating from UW-Madison, Schumaker decided to travel across Central America for a few months. He wanted to hone his Spanish skills and find a chance to volunteer. So when he stumbled upon a Web site that offered free room and board to anyone who would help take care of children in a Guatemalan orphanage, he figured it would be an easy way to get involved.

"I brought a whole bag of donated medicine for them," he explains. "But then I found out that there was no doctor or nurse for miles around. Since there was such a need for health care for these three hundred kids, and since I had shown up with this medicine, I basically got put in charge of being the orphanage doctor."

As a psychology graduate, he had no medical training, but Schumaker agreed to help anyway. He thought the role would entail little more than kissing bruised elbows and putting Band-Aids on scraped knees, but he quickly learned that many of the children were afflicted with a host of serious ailments that went far beyond the expertise of an American with a few medications on hand. Further, the orphanage was so poor that the



kids had no access to basic sanitary supplies such as soap and clean water for bathing, making hygiene all but impossible.

“It got to the point where I couldn’t walk through the orphanage grounds without kids coming up to me and pulling my shirt and rubbing the rashes on their arms and saying, ‘This itches! Help me!’” he recalls. “So I was fairly depressed while I was there. I really hated my role, because I had never felt so powerless. I wanted to do something, but I couldn’t do anything.”

One day, a young man stopped by the orphanage and told Schumaker that he’d grown up without family. He said that he didn’t have any photographs of himself as a child, no belongings from his early years, no parents to share memories with. His childhood was a blank slate, and he didn’t want any other orphaned kids to share in his fate.

“The man said that we should do something to help these kids — help them make little scrapbooks to hang on to belongings and develop a sense of personal heritage,” says Schumaker.

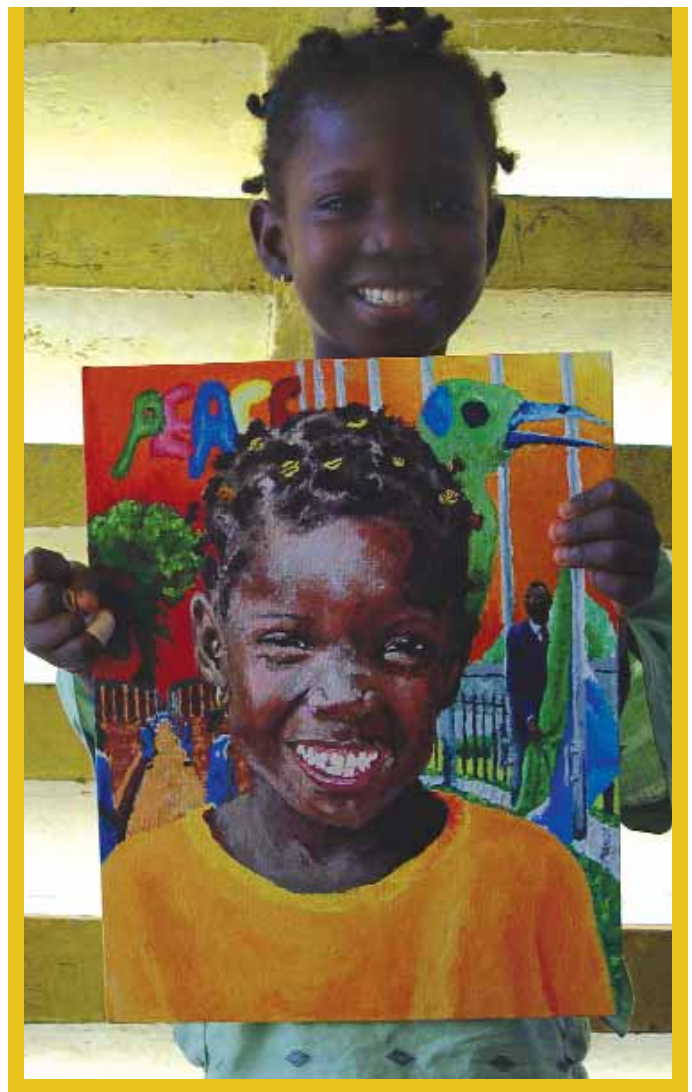
Some months later, when he thought back on that encounter, Schumaker was inspired to do something about the idea. By then back in the States, he went to work at Camp

Heartland in Willow River, Minnesota, a summer program for kids affected by HIV that was founded by Neil Willenson ‘92. Schumaker was intrigued by what Willenson had accomplished, especially since they were both fresh out of college. “I thought, I’m not too young to do this — I could make [something like] this happen,” he says.

Schumaker wanted to give the children something valuable and help them build a positive sense of identity. After giving the matter some thought, he came up with the idea of portraits. If Schumaker could get high school art students to paint pictures of the orphans and send them as gifts, the children would have a memento of their youth, a bit of history to hold on to.

He spent a day e-mailing art teachers at high schools across the country to ask if they wanted to get their students involved. Schumaker also began contacting U.S. nonprofit groups that work with orphanages overseas to ask if they would provide photographs of children who wanted their portraits done. Of the one hundred teachers he contacted that fall day in 2004, fifteen agreed to work to make his idea a reality. The Memory Project was born.

It soon became a full-time, unpaid job. As the Memory Project gathered momentum, Schumaker, who is currently pursuing



a master's degree at the UW-Madison School of Social Work, considered dropping out to focus all of his energies on his cause. He might have abandoned his education if now-emeritus professor Mona Wasow '66, MS'68 hadn't convinced him that a graduate degree would help him to achieve the Memory Project's goals. She and director of field education Barbara Hughes arranged for his work with the Memory Project to satisfy an independent reading requirement and half a semester of fieldwork. "Ben is so far ahead of the curve," says Hughes. "Most people his age haven't had these kinds of experiences."

Schumaker has managed to find time to run the Memory Project in between his classes and his part-time position as a research assistant. The project has no funding, so the schools involved agree to pay for supplies and shipping costs to mail the artwork. In that first school year, more than one thousand portraits were painted and sent to orphans in thirteen countries, including South Africa, Bolivia, Haiti, and China. By the end of the next school year, young artists across the country had mailed nearly four thousand more likenesses.

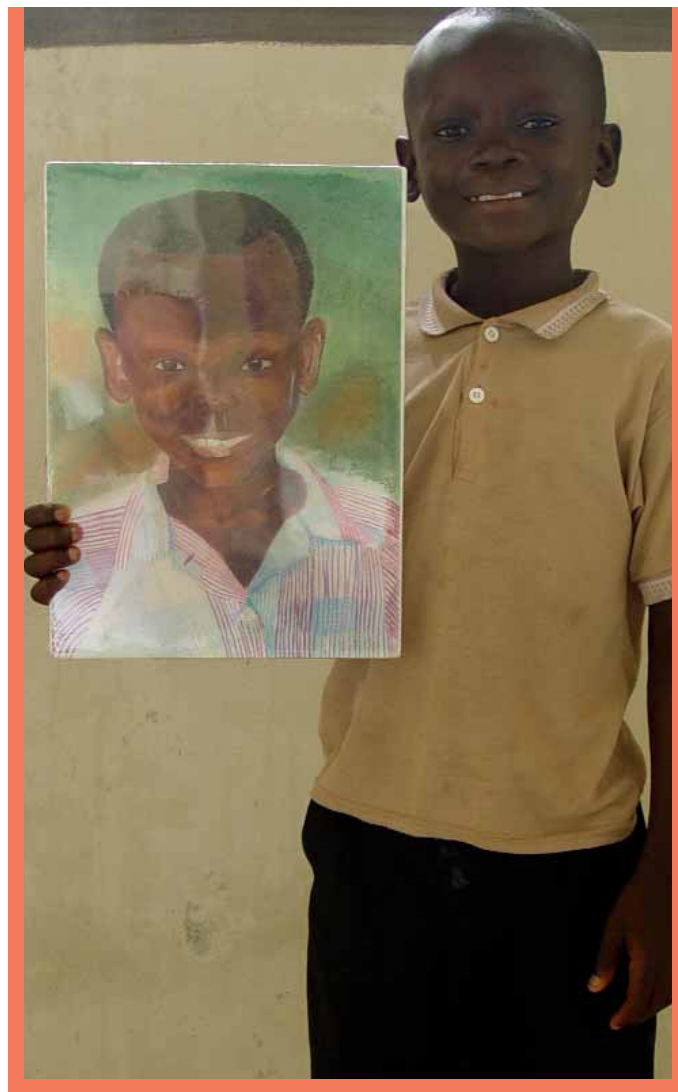
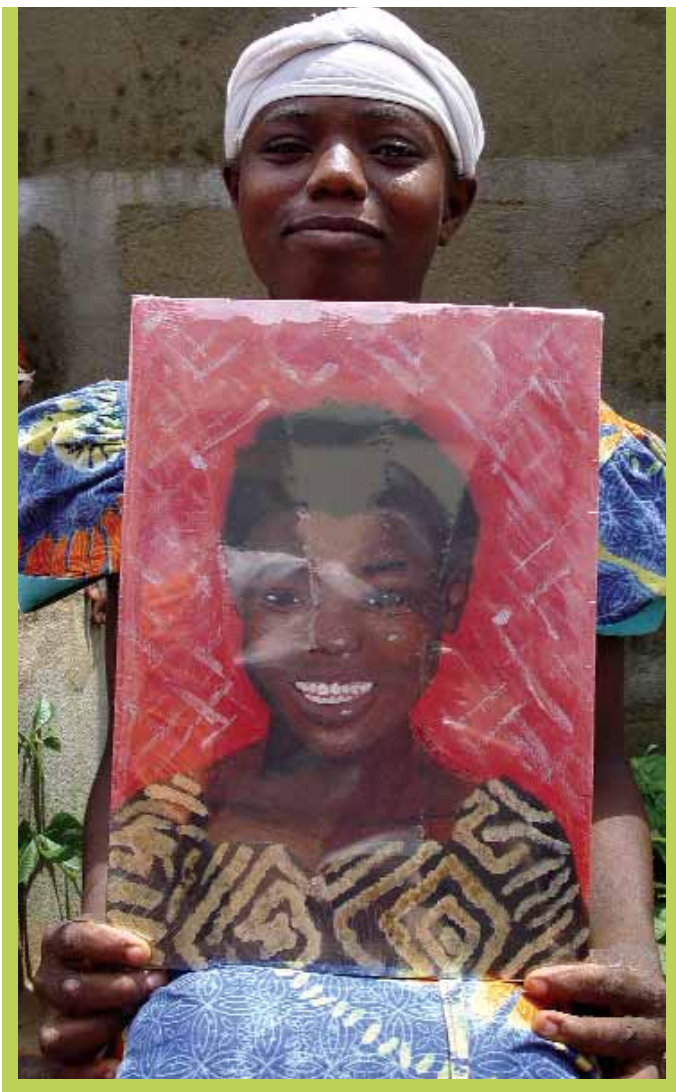
"One person I'm working with on this is coming back from Uganda next month," says Schumaker. "He's taking pictures of all the kids in that orphanage who want portraits. He said that

he knows this will be a major event in these kids' lives, because these are kids who own nothing more than the clothing that the orphanage has given them."

Through the Memory Project, Schumaker also hopes to raise awareness of global humanitarian issues among American children. When he sends teachers photos of children, Schumaker also offers talking points and facts about their living conditions. Many of the world's orphanages are located in Africa, where bloody civil wars and the AIDS epidemic have left more than 11 million children orphaned and without a basic education — a scenario that leads to perpetual poverty. Children in households affected by AIDS are often forced to drop out of school to help support their families. In Sierra Leone, for example, only 41 percent of children attend primary school.

Schumaker hopes that the American students will develop the compassion and drive to try to improve living conditions around the world. They could get involved in service and international issues, he suggests, or perhaps in their local AIDS campaigns. "AIDS is something that orphans millions of children around the world, but it's something people can work on right here in the U.S.," he says.

It wasn't long before some of the students involved in the



Memory Project wanted to do more for the children they painted. “Everybody was so into it,” says Debby Teska, an art teacher at North Rose-Wolcott High School in Wolcott, New York. “They’d come to class ready to work, they’d take their portraits home, and they’d ask me, ‘Can we do something beyond just the drawing?’”

Teska and the students decided to organize a clothing drive at the high school, and the community responded by donating gently used backpacks, coats, shoes, and raincoats. The school’s Future Business Leaders of America group pitched in by purchasing fifteen new backpacks and loading them with school supplies. Everything was sent to an orphanage in Sierra Leone — the home of the children whose portraits they’d painted during the spring semester. The following school year, Teska’s students couldn’t wait to get started on the project again, so Schumaker sent her photos of children from Mexico. “I want to get more schools interested in doing this,” Teska says. “It takes some extra work. But it’s so worth it.”

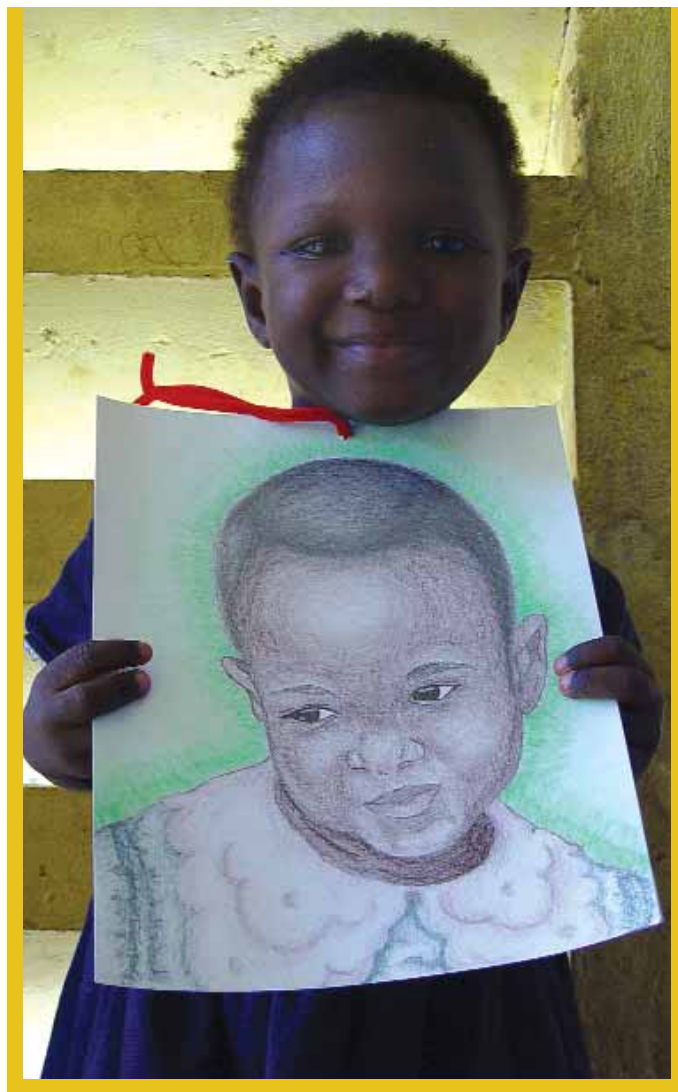
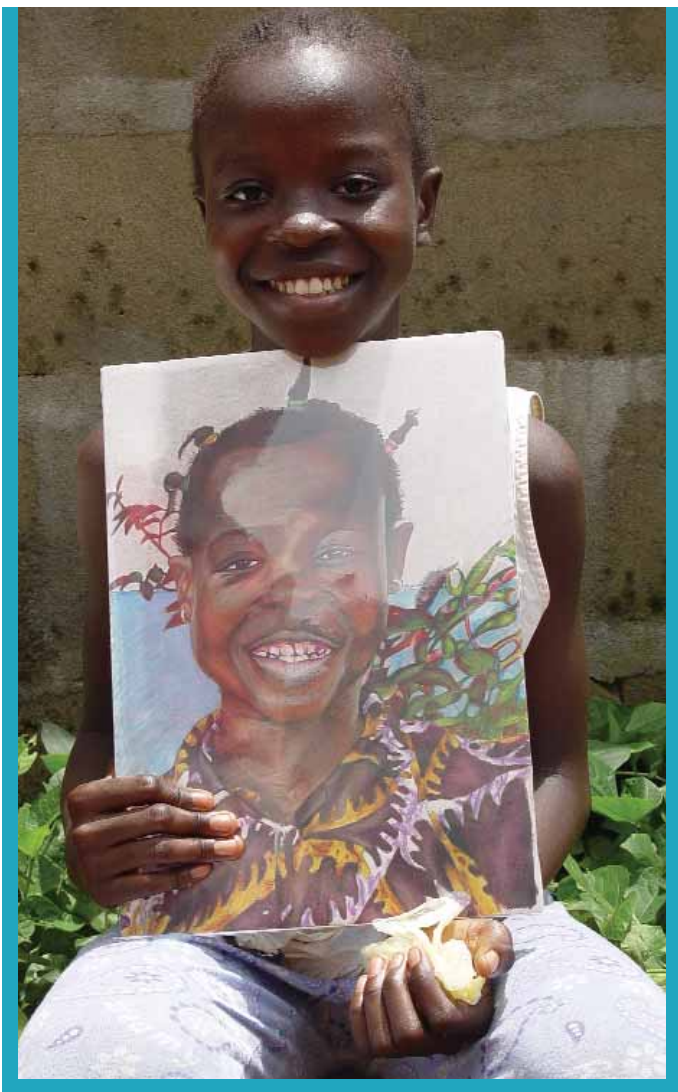
The most recent aspect to emerge from the Memory Project is the Books of Hope program, an effort to provide homemade books to children in Uganda. American students from kindergarten through college level write and illustrate uplifting stories

that are sent to shelters in the northern part of that country, where a brutal civil war rages, its armies populated by kidnapped children. In the past few years, as conflict has escalated, more than forty thousand children are forced to walk for miles each night to government-controlled towns so that they can sleep in safety.

The Books of Hope offer these displaced youngsters a few minutes of solace before they go to bed. Because Uganda’s national language is English, the stories don’t need to be translated, and they offer a way for the children to learn to read. To date, participants have sent ten thousand handmade books to Uganda, with their school districts covering the cost.

“It’s been inspiring,” Schumaker says. “Teachers have told me how dedicated their students are to the project. Some of the schools have even started to send teddy bears, blankets, and published children’s books in addition to the handmade ones.”

Many of the high school students who work on the Memory Project are deeply affected by the idea that they’re helping someone less fortunate. One student in Minnesota who painted a picture of an orphan from Sierra Leone developed an intensely personal connection — so much so that she wanted to share more than her talent with the girl. She wanted to share her life.



“I got a call one day from this student’s mother, who said they’d talked about it as a family and wanted to know if the girl was available for adoption,” Schumaker says. Unfortunately, as it turned out, none of the children in that orphanage were eligible for overseas adoption due to legal issues.

But Schumaker was moved by the fact that the Memory Project had inspired the student’s family to consider opening

their home and their lives to someone in need. The family is thinking of finding another child to adopt.

“I feel like if this whole thing resulted in just one child having a loving family,” Schumaker says, “it would all be worth it.”

Erin Hueffner '00 is an editorial associate for On Wisconsin. To learn more about the Memory Project, visit



Le’ad Rosenblith, left, and Courtney Silverstein of Parkway Central High School in Chesterfield, Missouri, were among the 4,000 students who completed portraits this past school year. The Memory Project has now branched out into sending hand-made books, as well as clothing and other needed items, to children around the world.