

## **`AT TIMES, I'VE WANTED TO TURN IT OFF TOO' Series: THE MIRACLE MERCHANTS. Special report. First of two parts.: [CHICAGOLAND FINAL Edition]**

For two decades, Struthers has been loved and lampooned as the public face of Third World child sponsorship, first as celebrity spokeswoman for Christian Children's Fund and more recently for its competitor, Save the Children Federation Inc.

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Asked about the pictures that accompany the Struthers "Remote Control" commercial, Save the Children said that "the images are representative of the conditions and circumstances that Save the Children is working to eliminate. . . . This is not to say they are images from the Save the Children impact area."

The pitch for sponsors. They are known as 'flies-in-the-eyes' commercials. They feature the wrenching images of starving children, their bellies bowed and faces speckled with insects. They tear at your heart. But the boys and girls in the ads are not representative of most sponsored children.

Sally Struthers, the one-time star of "All in the Family," is pictured in front of a television set, clicking a remote as images of starving children race across the screen.

"At times, I've wanted to turn it off too," she says. Her eyes are on the verge of tears.

"You can continue to turn off the needs, or you can call this number and say 'Yes' to sponsoring one precious girl or boy."

She squeezes the remote again.

"I promise, you can make these haunting pictures go away."

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and more recently for its competitor, Save the Children Federation Inc.

Verent Mills, one-time director of CCF, has called Struthers the primary reason his charity's annual income soared from \$29 million in 1976 to \$103 million by 1991.

"She unlocked a gold mine," Mills said in a charity publication.

Struthers is hardly the only celebrity to film fundraising pleas for suffering children. But she is the undisputed queen of the genre, and her two-decade career as a spokeswoman mirrors the evolution of a fundraising strategy that markets altruism and guilt with the slickness of ad campaigns for car shampoo or exercise videos.

The "remote control" commercial, running now for four years, is a prime example of ads used by SCF and similar groups to create the illusion that donations go directly to the same hollow-faced, sickly looking children who give the ads their emotional power.

In truth, the groups acknowledge that many of the children in their ads do not actually benefit from their programs, but merely appear on camera. Often, the wrenching images of starving children, their bellies bowed and faces speckled with flies, are plucked from file footage taken years earlier.

Some ads feature famine and disaster victims from such countries as Somalia, even though the groups do not serve children there.

And, though disease and deprivation are realities in developing nations, child sponsorship commercials are frequently laced with wildly inflated claims about conditions facing children in these countries.

When the first spots featuring Struthers aired in 1976, the tone was more muted. Instead of starving children, one early spot featured Struthers and some professional football players making a straightforward pitch for donations.

Since then, child sponsorship charities, including Children International and Childreach, have launched multimillion dollar advertising campaigns that continually ratchet up the televised pathos as they impel viewers to "call now" and loosen their wallets, usually to the tune of \$10 to \$20 a month.

The formula for selling the sponsorships has become so ubiquitous--and so successful--that industry insiders have even given it a name.

"Flies-in-the-eyes," they call it.

This hardball approach "is all about showing the need," said Phil Licking, an account executive at the Burford Group, a Richmond, Va., advertising agency that represents the Christian Children's Fund. "What we do is show the reality because you can't take each potential sponsor out into the field."

Typically, the commercials are based on what some academics call a "fear appeal" model that mines emotions and is commonly used to push social causes.

"You loosen wallets with guilt," said Raphael Sonnenshein, a California State University professor who has studied social marketing. "There is no point to the commercial if the child is in no danger of dying."

To find these devastating images, the sponsorship agencies have often relied on footage that doesn't necessarily depict sponsored children.

Asked about the pictures that accompany the Struthers "Remote Control" commercial, Save the Children said that "the images are representative of the conditions and circumstances that Save the Children is working to eliminate. . . . This is not to say they are images from the Save the Children impact area."

There is no indication that Struthers knew the children in her ads would not likely be sponsored.

Such techniques are a means to a worthy end, the groups contend.

"If you've been to the field, and you've seen the need, the inclination is to go for the jugular," said Stacey Pulner Mihaly, marketing director for Childreach.

One Childreach commercial shows a small American boy asking his aunt why little children die. While the two talk, pictures of sick children from faraway lands flash across the screen.

Recurring in several Save the Children commercials are photos of two African children lying on a mat who appear dead or on the verge of dying. SCF's marketing director Brian Anderson said he had no qualms about showing images of dead children--even youngsters who may never have been sponsored by his group--if it proved effective in raising funds.

"The public really decides what will be run and what won't be run through their response to the advertisements," Anderson explained.

He said he had no information on the fate of the two youngsters on the mat who were featured in several SCF commercials.

In 1996, Save the Children tried a spot featuring a chorus singing an uplifting refrain about "a light that shines from up above, seeds of compassion in the air."

There was one problem with the ad.

"It wasn't successful," Anderson said.

To succeed, the groups said a commercial must be able to stir the hearts of women, who drive the decision to give to child sponsorship.

It was largely because of her appeal to women that in 1976 a young television star named Sally Struthers was tapped by the Christian Children's Fund to become the group's spokeswoman.

Following a 1974 congressional inquiry into whether the sponsors' dollars actually were spent on benefits for needy children, thousands of angry donors canceled their monthly stipends to the group.

Charles Gregg, who was the fund's development director at the time, racked his brains for a spokesperson who could stand up to the criticism and convey the bright heart of the charity's mission. He ran a computerized list of the fund's child sponsors who lived in celebrity ZIP codes and mulled over whom to approach.

When Gregg came across Struthers' name as sponsoring a Filipino girl named Marite, he hit the jackpot. Struthers was not only a star on a critically acclaimed and highly rated

comedy show, but her character also meshed perfectly with the fund's computer profile of its typical sponsor: a married woman and lapsed Roman Catholic, a blue-collar housewife who led with her heart.

Even better, she didn't need to act the part. Struthers grew up in a working-class Portland, Ore., household where, she has said, charity was an integral fact of life.

At one point, Christian Children's Fund studies showed that ads Struthers was associated with were responsible for attracting more than 90 percent of its new sponsors.

The fund never paid Struthers directly for her work, but, because she traveled to dangerous places on its photo shoots, it did take out a \$2 million insurance policy on her life that named her daughter as beneficiary. It also paid the Los Angeles public relations firm that represented Struthers at least \$1,000 a month to do work for CCF, Gregg said.

And when Struthers traveled to developing countries to be filmed for fund commercials, she sometimes took along Pamela Sharp, her publicist, and both flew first-class at the fund's expense. A Struthers hairdresser and makeup specialist also went along, although they flew coach, Gregg said.

Before accepting Gregg's offer and becoming CCF's spokeswoman, Struthers extensively quizzed the staff at the group's Richmond, Va., headquarters and then spent a week in Guatemala looking at Christian Children's Fund projects, according to Sharp and others.

Gregg recalled that Struthers came back and told him, "I'm yours for life."

Not quite.

By the fall of 1993, after 17 years of using Struthers as a spokeswoman, some of the fund's officials began debating her effectiveness and sought to reduce her public role.

Struthers was "devastated" by the move, she told the fund in a 1993 letter, and demanded that it stop airing her TV spots and pull from circulation other material using her name or picture. Not long after, she became a spokeswoman for Save the Children, though she has been used sparingly by that group.

Even before her break with the Christian Children's Fund, the pleas Struthers made on

behalf of the charity had grown intensely melodramatic.

"Welcome to hell, hell on earth," Struthers said in a 1991 commercial, as she stumbled through the puddles of a Latin American slum.

"Fifteen million innocent little children are dying every year," she said. "A few of the luckier ones die at birth, mercifully. The rest are slowly murdered by hunger and disease, cold-bloodedly killed by rotten food, rotten medicine, rotten housing--God! The stink is sickening!"

These commercials began to insinuate themselves into popular culture in the 1980s when the organizations took advantage of the cheap rates offered by the relatively new medium of cable television.

The groups also aired their spots late at night, wedged between commercials for music collections and hair products, when fees charged by local affiliates were low, and when several of the commercials were run for free as public service announcements.

Media deregulation has led to a sharp decline in free spots and an increase in cable advertising rates. That has caused the groups to question their reliance on television, although the commercials continue to be a pillar of their fundraising efforts.

According to Competitive Media Services, an industry group that tracks advertising spending, Save the Children, CCF, Childreach and Children International spent about \$10 million on all forms of television advertising in 1996.

Most commercials suggest--and many flatly state--that the dollars donated to such organizations will go directly to a specific child "enrolled" in a sponsorship program.

Said Alan Sader, an actor who appears in CCF commercials: "The idea is to make people pick up the phone and sponsor a child . . . I don't know that the intention there is to explain it totally. That might be terribly boring when you have 60 to 120 seconds to convey a message."

Another mainstay of child sponsorship advertising is celebrity endorsement, a practice that dates to 1919, when royalty attended a fundraising Christmas concert on behalf of the British forerunner of Save the Children.

James Garner, Brooke Shields, Linda Evans, Valerie Harper, Christopher Reeve, Angela Lansbury and even Katharine Hepburn are just some of the many entertainers who have publicly touted the virtues of child sponsorship.

"We're always looking for new celebrities that bring us fresh audiences," said Brian Anderson of SCF. The group's World Wide Web site looks like a "Hollywood Squares" alumni roster.

But there are celebrities and there are celebrities, and not all who appear on behalf of child sponsorship groups would make the Hollywood "A" list.

Indeed, actor Cliff Robertson suggested that some actors allow their name to be used by child sponsorship groups for less than charitable reasons.

"I just deplore some of these people that almost take a Mother Teresa stance when, in truth, it's, 'Let's get some exposure,' " said Robertson, who himself appeared in a 1981 commercial for Save the Children. Robertson said that when he made the spot he believed in child sponsorship, but now says he is "disgusted" by the groups' ad campaigns.

Actor Scott Bakula, who appeared in a 1995 commercial touting the benefits of his sponsorship of a child through SCF, had not been a sponsor since 1992. And that sponsorship was paid for by a Hollywood producer, according to Save the Children. Bakula, through his publicist, declined comment.

Ironically, Christian Children's Fund, its ties with Struthers long-severed, now eschews the use of celebrities.

Its principal spokesman these days is Sader, a little-known Richmond, Va., actor.

CCF development director Cheri Dahl thinks more celebrities are "something that we hardly need."

Struthers, however, presses on at SCF. She declined to be interviewed by the Tribune about her work for Christian Children's Fund and Save the Children. But her publicist, Sharp, summed up Struthers' contribution.

"Hundreds of thousands of children go to sleep at night with food in their belly because she came on board and took up this issue as her cause," Sharp said.

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### About this special report

Between 1992 and 1996, Americans donated more than \$850 million to four of the largest and best-known child sponsorship organizations: Save the Children, the Christian Children's Fund, Children International and Childreach. That money was sent on faith that it would reach an African village, a Pacific island or a Latin American slum and, in the language of the Christian Children's Fund, "work a miracle" in the life of the little girl or boy whose photographs and letters are the sponsor's only evidence of the child's existence. To determine whether such faith is warranted, in 1995 Tribune reporters and editors began sponsoring these 12 children through four organizations without any mention of their Tribune affiliation. Last May, with no assistance from the four sponsorship organizations, Tribune reporters set out to learn how the lives of the sponsored children had been affected. Part One of this special report recounts what the Tribune learned about two of those organizations, Save the Children and Childreach. Part Two, which appears next week, examines Children International and the Christian Children's Fund.

### **Illustration**

PHOTOS 4; Caption: PHOTO: Sally Struthers The queen of appeal ads has brought in millions for two sponsorship groups. PHOTOS: Images from a different planet The children portrayed in the wrenching images in television and used by some child sponsorship groups bear little resemblance to most Third World children. Christian Children's Fund, 1995. Save the Children, 1993. Christian Children's Fund, 1995. Photography by Jose More.

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