

High School Boys and a Priest from Toledo Founded International Samaritan, a Nonprofit that is Thriving 30 Years Later

International Samaritan celebrates 30 years of helping people in garbage dumps.

ANN ARBOR, MI, UNITED STATES, August 27, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Five high school boys and a Catholic priest made a surprising discovery, and founded an international nonprofit that is expanding and thriving 30 years later.

In 1994, students from Toledo, Ohio's St. John Jesuit High School were on a service immersion trip to Guatemala. While on an excursion, a road closure and detour led them to drive by the city's garbage dump. They stopped, surprised to see hundreds of people picking through trash, looking for items to keep or sell.



After helping to establish International Samaritan 30 years ago, Christopher Lindsey recently visited scholarship students the nonprofit supports in Kenya.

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Christopher Lindsey

“The smell was overwhelming,” remembers Christopher Lindsey, who was a St. John’s rising senior at the time. “We saw tons of people living and working in the garbage dump. It was pretty shocking.”

Fr. Don Vettese, S.J., and the students he was with, kept talking about what they witnessed at the garbage dump. A few months later, they wrote to the mayor of Guatemala City, whom they had met on their trip, and asked how they

could help.

The mayor said that the biggest need was access to better housing for the people who lived at,

and near, the garbage dump. Fr. Vettese turned to several friends and asked for their help.

Two of those friends were the late Bill Pulte and his wife, Karen. The Pultes had built the largest home construction company in the United States, and they agreed to help build homes in Guatemala.

Another friend agreed to help. Toledo attorney Joe Rideout was on the board at St. John's, his alma mater. Rideout lent his legal expertise and became one of the founding board members. The nonprofit was originally known as Central American Ministries before it expanded and changed its name to [International Samaritan](#).



Some of International Samaritan's Founding Families: John and Joan Vatterott, Fr. Don Vettese, S.J., Joe Rideout, Scott Savage, and Karen and Bill Pulte.

While Rideout helped set up the organization, "what really brought it home for me," he says, "was when my wife, Beverly, and I took a small group trip with Fr. Vettese to Guatemala in 2002."

When Rideout walked through the dumpsite and saw the homes in the community next to the dump, "Only then did I really understand the level of poverty," he recalls. "The poverty was at an almost unimaginable level."

Rideout and his wife could see homes that International Samaritan built, along with a nursery and a school that still partners with the organization today. During International Samaritan's first 15 years, the nonprofit focused on building homes, nurseries, medical clinics, and clean water systems, in Guatemala and other Central American countries.

About fifteen years ago, the focus changed to scholarship support after research by Dr. Ken Coleman, Ph.D., a political scientist and the husband of former University of Michigan president Mary Sue Coleman. Coleman's research revealed that many students in Central American communities near dumpsites were dropping out of school to work in the dumpsites with their families and that education could be the key to breaking the cycle of poverty.

Now, International Samaritan supports nearly 1,000 scholarship students and has local teams in seven countries, including three in Central America, one in the Caribbean, and three in East Africa.

This past June, Christopher Lindsey and his family traveled to Kenya and met International Samaritan's local team and many scholarship students the nonprofit supports. It was his first trip with the organization that he helped establish 30 years ago. He and his family walked through Nairobi's Dandora dumpsite.

"I was shocked to see that almost a million people live in the Dandora area at the dumpsite," he says. "There were rows and rows of tiny tin homes with open sewers running through them and sometimes there would be 14 people living in them."

On that visit, Lindsey and his family met and talked with some of the scholarship students that International Samaritan supports. These children are in school, thanks to their scholarships, with tuition covered and support for basic health and wellness needs.

"The scholars were super friendly and outgoing," Lindsey says. "Hearing from the scholars about their lives and plans for the future, and then seeing the contrast of their family's living situation—was moving!"

Lindsey has served on the board of International Samaritan for the past 12 years. During that time, he has heard many success stories from scholarship students who graduated from college or trade school and then earned nearly three times as much as the household in which they grew up.

"The challenges in these dumpsites are great," Lindsey admits. "But I think it's clear that the model we've developed does work and is continuing to work."

Rideout agrees. He is just ending his time on International Samaritan's board after 30 years of service.

"We've adjusted and evolved our programs over the years, but our mission to alleviate poverty has remained the same," he says. "We're getting better and better at what we do, and that's resulting in a more substantial impact. I couldn't be more excited about where International Samaritan is going."

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