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Healthy children, thriving communities

By Nancy Croft Baker



Ruth Cameron, pictured with two of her five children, credits INMED and her faith for helping her overcome a difficult separation from her husband. INMED's family homelessness prevention program not only helped Cameron through a financial crisis, but provided her with educational tools and counseling to help her family survive and thrive. "Whenever I hear of someone in financial hardship, I always refer them to INMED because they were a tremendous support system for me," she says. "They will help you get to a better place in your life."

When Ruth Cameron became a single mother of five children under age 9, she could never have guessed that the programs that would help her family survive and eventually thrive were conceived by another single mother in the jungles of Guatemala nearly three decades ago. Working quietly behind the scenes in more than 100 countries, Ashburn-based INMED Partnerships for Children has helped hundreds of thousands of at-risk children and their families escape poverty -- many right here in Loudoun County.

"When my husband and I separated, there was not enough money to pay rent and utilities," says Cameron, a school bus driver who lives in Leesburg. "I didn't know where to turn or what to do. I had been homeless before and was worried for my children." An acquaintance told her about INMED, and before she knew it, Cameron was assigned a compassionate case manager, mentor and friend, who helped her navigate the various resources available to help her over the hump as well as provide her the education and guidance to ensure sustainability.

"There are programs out there to help families through an immediate crisis, but if they're not combined with education and solid case

management, most will be right back where they started eventually," notes Linda Pfeiffer, INMED's founder, president and CEO. She observed that fact firsthand as a young anthropologist leading excavations in the late 1970s for the University of California, Santa Barbara, in the steamy jungles of Mexico and Central America.

"As a single mother of a young child I identified with the mothers in the remote villages, who had the same concerns for their families that any mother has: protecting their children from hunger, disease and violence," Pfeiffer recalls. Yet she watched with dismay as well-intentioned companies, relief organizations and even doctors offered short-term assistance with no lasting effect. "There were doctors who didn't understand the indigenous folklore and frightened the

locals," she explains. Relief organizations sent boxes of sample medications without instructions in the native language and no distinction between adult and children's dosages. "Every time I went home, I left a piece of my heart behind with those children," she says. During another excavation, Pfeiffer was horrified to see a mother feed her child a blood pressure medication for diarrhea. "That's when I decided to get involved in forming partnerships to address international health, social and economic issues at the community level."



For more than 20 years, INMED Partnerships for Children has helped keep the most vulnerable families intact in Loudoun County through its award-winning MotherNet/Healthy Families Loudoun program, parent education classes and support groups, intensive case management and its new family homelessness prevention program. "It's a big celebration when participants graduate from our programs," notes INMED founder and CEO Linda Pfeiffer.

Putting the right pieces together

That pivotal moment transformed Pfeiffer's promising career in academia into a lifelong mission to build collaborations among corporations, government agencies and nonprofit groups to build healthy communities worldwide, one child at a time. It also moved Pfeiffer from her native state of California to the Washington, D.C., region to engage the key players in international public health. INMED's list of partners includes such industry and nonprofit heavyweights as Freddie Mac Foundation, Monsanto Fund, GE Foundation, United Way, March of Dimes, Northrop Grumman, DHL, Johnson & Johnson, Kraft Foods, ALCOA, Kaiser Permanente and USAID, among dozens of other local and national entities.

Pfeiffer marvels at how her early efforts have evolved. "As with any personal journey, there were a lot of twists and turns," she laughs. Initially, she consulted with The World Bank and international relief agencies to form partnerships with pharmaceutical companies to provide medications to treat children with tuberculosis, malaria and intestinal parasites. "We quickly expanded our efforts when we found that the pharmaceutical industry had so much more to offer than just funds and medications."

For example, Pfeiffer discovered pharmaceutical warehouses of educational and training materials in different languages but no distribution network. Pfeiffer began working directly with community leaders as an intermediary between companies and nonprofits to implement health and education programs. "Our purpose is not to stay someplace forever but to empower local leadership," Pfeiffer says. With a \$100,000 grant from Ciba-Geigy in 1986,

Pfeiffer moved to Washington, D.C., to found INMED and moved its offices to Loudoun County just two years later.

"Through our programs, the process of transformation that begins with children overflows to their families and communities," Pfeiffer explains. "We're creating real, meaningful, sustainable change that crosses generations, breaks the cycle of poverty and leads to a brighter future for all." That vision was reinforced recently when Pfeiffer learned of a mother in a poverty-ravaged village in northern Brazil who had received INMED assistance and education as a child in another village. "She assured her neighbors that everything would be okay because INMED was coming to help the village," Pfeiffer beams. "She held her own healthy children up as an example of what she had learned about proper nutrition and disease prevention from INMED and encouraged the other mothers that their children will be healthy, too, if they follow our program."




INMED's latest intervention for world health and economic development is an innovative and inexpensive aquaponics system developed by Pfeiffer's husband and INMED Executive VP Thad Jackson, a world renowned expert in leading programs on maternal and child health, nutrition and agriculture. He has converted a formal library in their pre-Civil War era home in Upperville into a lab for cultivating fast-growing tilapia fish for the couple's experimental greenhouse and fish pond in the back yard. Jackson uses a 500-gallon rainwater collection tank to provide water for the greenhouse fish pond. His aquaponics system is designed to raise enough fish and produce to sustain a family of four with enough left over to sell for income.

Help on the homefront

INMED's partnerships are building healthy families in Loudoun County, South Central Los Angeles and in other communities throughout the United States. Best known locally for its highly successful MotherNet and Healthy Families Loudoun programs, INMED's model for intensive, long-term home visiting and case management services has been adopted by social service agencies in all 50 states. Assistance begins during pregnancy and is offered for up to five years, including weekly home visits during pregnancy and immediately after birth (more often for the highest-risk participants), and then less frequently as families demonstrate increased skills and self-sufficiency. INMED's bilingual family support workers also provide in-home mentoring and guidance, as well as culturally and linguistically appropriate education on positive parenting skills, child health, nutrition, home safety, communication and relationship-building skills, and family violence awareness and prevention.

"They helped me see a bigger picture, one step at a time, by setting realistic goals and creating a budget I could stick to," Cameron says. "The most meaningful part was that my case manager was always available to encourage me on those days when I thought I'd lose my mind. She never candy coated anything, but she was always upbeat and positive and often pointed me to other resources I could use. I knew I would succeed with her support."

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As a young anthropologist in the jungles of Guatemala, Pfeiffer conceived a better way to help families not only overcome catastrophic environments but to learn to be self sufficient and successful in the long term. Left: Pfeiffer inspects a truckload of emergency relief items in Brazil to ensure they are properly labeled and distributed. Center: Pfeiffer offers deworming medication to a child in Brazil. "Intestinal parasites are easy to eradicate, but in regions without access to the proper medications, they can be deadly." Pfeiffer herself suffered from a skin-burrowing parasite while leading excavations in Mexico and Central America. Right: Once a community becomes healthy through medical interventions, INMED teaches children and their families how to live healthy lives through its school garden program, such as this one in South Africa, and other educational efforts.

Food for success

Looking beyond early childhood development, INMED is tackling the issues of nutrition and food security at home and abroad. Its school garden program has been highly successful in promoting not only the benefits of eating fresh produce but providing opportunities to incorporate gardens into math, science and language curricula throughout Brazil, Peru and South Africa. INMED hopes to recreate the program locally by constructing a greenhouse and raised garden at Loudoun's transitional housing facility in Leesburg later this year.

"Here at home, impoverished children face the problem of being malnourished while also being obese," Pfeiffer explains. "It comes from lack of access to fresh foods and their parents' lack of education about proper nutrition." The group has garnered the support of the Loudoun Area Chefs Collaborative (LACC) to not only raise funds for the project via its popular "dinners for a cause" but by offering classes to the facility's residents.

"We're really excited about this project," says Beverly Biland, owner of The Restaurant at Patowmack Farm and founder of the LACC, which raised \$21,000 for the greenhouse last December. "We're hoping that some of our chefs will teach nutrition classes and show residents how to prepare the food they grow." Biland also plans to donate plants for the raised garden.



Pfeiffer and Jackson demonstrate the symbiotic aquaponics system that they're installing in South Africa and Jamaica. Fish waste and water are regularly pumped through beds of produce, which filter the water for reuse in the fish pond. In the dead of winter, the couple's experimental unit boasted a bountiful crop of squash, beans, peas and mustard greens as well as 250 sizable tilapia. The entire system can be installed for less than \$1,000.

INMED's latest crusade is the development of affordable aquaponics, a sustainable [food production](#) system that combines [aquaculture](#) with hydroponics. The result is a 500-gallon recirculating fish tank that provides water and fertilizer to cultivate beds of produce raised in a greenhouse environment for under \$1,000. "With global warming and diminishing water resources, this inexpensive symbiotic system can provide enough fish and produce to feed a family of four with extra to sell for a steady income," explains Thad Jackson, a world-renowned immunologist and infectious disease expert and executive vice president of INMED. (He also happens to be Pfeiffer's husband.) INMED has installed one test unit with three more systems under construction in South Africa. It also has orders to install 25 systems in Jamaica. "We're hoping these systems will keep young people on family farms and Third World communities intact, because there won't be a need to venture to the big city to find work," Jackson says.



When she's not deworming children in Third World countries or collecting eggs on her Upperville property, Linda Pfeiffer is getting the word out about her passion – INMED Partnerships for Children. She was a recent featured speaker at Ellen Goldberg's (right) popular Middleburg Women Networking Group luncheons, where guests were surprised to learn that INMED has done so much for the county and the world. "We've been too busy doing our work to spend time on marketing," Pfeiffer admits. "I want people to know we're out there in case they'd like to help."

"Sometimes people just need to be shown a better way," Cameron says. "The people at INMED understand that there are seasons of trial, and they give you the tools to make it through." Ultimately, the key to success is a positive attitude, she adds. "INMED taught me that if you approach a bad situation with a negative attitude and feeling of entitlement, you will likely fail. But if you have an attitude of gratitude and an open mind, there's nothing you can't overcome."

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