



Seraphine lives in Kigali, Rwanda. She was 11 years old when this photo was taken. Leslie Kelly collection

She will always be on my mind and in my heart

By Andy Pohl

Sunday, November 20, 2016 5:45am | [LIFE](#)

Just how do you say goodbye to someone you've never met?

That's what I'm struggling with right now. For the past 10 years, I've sponsored a World Vision child in Rwanda. Seraphine is her name. I'd always wanted to do something like that, but it took a television commercial to move me to action.

I remember the day very clearly. It was mid-December 2006. I was doing my usual Saturday chores. Standing at the ironing board, watching the History Channel, on came a commercial about sponsoring a World Vision child. I looked at the faces of the children in the commercial. I heard them say it was only \$35 a month. I began to think, "What can I give up that costs about \$35 a month?"

Then it hit me — my cell phone. Soon, I was online looking for a face that stood out to me. And there she was, Seraphine, an 8-year-old child in the Karaba community near Kigali, Rwanda. I signed up that day to be Seraphine's sponsor. And now, almost 10 years later, a letter arrived this week from World Vision telling me that World Vision's work in the Karaba community is done.

In the 15 years that World Vision has been working in the community, they've added two health clinics for the residents. Health programs and nutrition education have been made available and malnutrition rates have dropped dramatically. And those with AIDS and HIV are being more accepted in the community because of education about the disease.

The World Vision program and a number of sponsorships of local children have resulted in 15 new schools being built. Cooperatives have been formed to keep bees, fish and make soap, in addition to agricultural crops, thus helping economic development in the community. There's been an 11-mile pipeline constructed that gives drinkable water to more than 12,000 people at 32 sites.

That statistic about water stood out to me because, in the first letter I received from Seraphine, she told me about herself — what she liked in school, how many brothers and sisters she had, and that her family chore was to go and get water once a day, a two-mile hike. From that day on, I couldn't run water without thinking of my child, Seraphine.

According to the rules, I could write her anytime and send small gifts, nothing larger than a 6-inch by 9-inch envelope. Suggestions were colored pencils (Crayons will melt), notepads, stickers, hair bows, photos, etc.

Through the past 10 years, I've sent items for her birthday and at Christmas. I've written letters about once every other month. And I've received letters and drawings she's made me with the pencils I've sent her.

Each year, I get a card thanking me for the extra \$100 I give to her family for Christmas. (It's amazing how far \$100 goes in Rwanda. It can buy a goat, a pig, 20 pounds of rice, maize, cooking oil, shoes for the entire family, along with a new dress for Seraphine.) And, once a year I get a progress report telling me how Seraphine is doing in school with a recent photograph of her.

But all of this is now coming to an end. Because the work is done in Seraphine's community, World Vision is moving on to other places that need help. That means sponsorships end, although there are opportunities to sponsor children elsewhere.

I am being asked to send a final letter to Seraphine and let her know she will always be in my heart and prayers. Yes, that is true, and I've prayed for her every day since I began this journey. I've also thought many times about how wonderful it would be to go to Rwanda and meet her. It's one of those bucket list things. I know that probably will never happen as there is no way to keep track of her now, or send her letters.

I will write her the goodbye letter and she will receive her Christmas gifts from me. And I'll move forward with another child to sponsor. Her name is Docus and she is in Kampala, Uganda. It's now \$45 a month to be a sponsor, but because times have been good to me, I can afford that (and a cell phone I got last year).

I'll care for Docus just as I have for Seraphine. But I will never forget, Seraphine, my "first" child. She will always be on my mind and in my heart.

World Vision is based in Federal Way. It has received high ratings as a nonprofit charity. Learn more at www.worldvision.org.

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Seraphine and her father in Kigali, Rwanda

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Daily News

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