

'Mother Teresa of Cairo' Offers Hope And Faith to Impoverished Egyptians

Maggie Gobran is an angel of mercy to thousands who live in the vast garbage dumps of the ancient city

It isn't only the fields that are white for harvest for Maggie Gobran. So are the ghettos.

As the youngest daughter of an affluent Egyptian family in Cairo's Coptic community, Gobran was deeply changed the first time she saw her city's burgeoning slums. Her answer has been Stephen's Children, a ministry she founded 12 years ago to help the estimated 500,000 families who survive by living in the ancient city's five sprawling garbage dumps.

Quiet and unassuming, Gobran has been hailed as "St. Maggie" by some and "the Mother Teresa of Cairo" by others. Her ministry's letterhead lists her simply as "Mama Maggie." That's how she's known to the people she helps.

Gobran provides hope to thousands of poverty-stricken parents and children who live in squalid shacks amid Cairo's refuse. More than 5 million people live in the dumps. Her ministry also is at work in more than 40 other slum areas where people live in equally desperate conditions.

Many of the families comprise "seven to 12 people living in one-room shanty houses with shared bathrooms and kitchen," Gobran told Charisma. "Many of them live on less than \$1 per day." Scott Singletary, the ministry's director of development, called the poverty these families live in

“overwhelming.”

“You wonder how they live in these conditions and survive. It’s a mass of humanity mixed with animals in which there’s scarcely a distinction in the living conditions. The smells are overwhelming,” he said.

Businessman J.C. Huizenga, chair-man of Gobran’s board, said that during one visit to the ministry he saw “barefooted [children treading] through water and garbage and babies chewing on batteries.”

Families live in the dumps or in the slums because they can’t afford to live elsewhere. Many emigrated from rural areas in hope of finding work in Cairo. With training, they hope to better themselves and eventually earn a good living.

To help them achieve that, Stephen’s Children provides an array of services that includes food and clothing distribution, vocational training, medical treatment and getaways to Christian camps.

U.S. Rep. Pete Hoekstra of Michigan saw the ministry firsthand after doing a lot of official traveling.

“[Along with] a friend, we got frustrated with meeting with heads of state, and we wanted to see how the real people live,” Hoekstra said. His visit to Stephen’s Children was the highlight of his trip and “better than meeting with dignitaries and kings,” he said.

He added that he was “inspired” after seeing Gobran at work,

emphasizing that she is making a big difference in the lives of those she ministers to.

Said Gobran: "In a non-Christian part of the world, in the midst of the darkness and despair we light a candle of light and hope. [We're] concentrating on children, as they are the most needy, the most vulnerable. They are the future."

Gobran said their motivation is the overwhelming need surrounding them. "Our hope is that these deprived families and children will come to know Jesus and have a hope and a place in eternity," she said.

Overall, the ministry is making a huge impact, according to Singletary: "Cairo is the hub of the Arab commercial world, and here's a ministry right in the middle of that."

Jeremy Reynolds