A Special Place for Children’s Home Alumni

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How You Can Help

The photographs and historical artifacts displayed in the museum are a representation of Klingberg Family Centers’ extensive archives. Funds will need to be raised to continue this project and accomplish the following goals:

☛ Cataloging, scanning, restoring and electronically preserving all photographs;
☛ Preserving and cataloging John Eric Klingberg’s writings, including personal letters, manuscripts, and diaries; and;
☛ Expanding the museum experience with an outside tour of the Klingberg Hilltop;
☛ Creating different displays in the museum and rotating them seasonally.

Another significant goal is to produce a made-for-television documentary about orphan life in the United States. Utilizing our one-of-a-kind motion pictures of life in the Children’s Home (approximately 2 ½ hours) and filmed interviews with alumni (about 16 hours) we hope to create a moving tribute intended to foster greater understanding of the importance of parental love and a family life for all children. Funding is needed for the final editing, production and distribution of what we believe will be a powerful documentary.

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The Plight of Children in America in the 1800s

Throughout the course of history, societies have struggled to find ways to protect and provide for children who have been essentially orphaned due to the death of one or both parents and the effects of poverty, abuse, addiction and disease.

As America became more industrialized, large urban centers in the Northeast and other regions experienced burgeoning populations with limited resources. In the 1800s, hundreds of boys and girls roamed the streets of major cities—eating, sleeping and living according to whatever means they could. Some would band together to form gangs in an effort to survive. Other children were legally indentured to work for their food and lodging in private homes.

The effects of poverty or the death of a spouse often led even devoted parents to give up their children, sometimes temporarily, in the hopes that their little ones might be well-fed, safe and warm.

Perhaps the worst fate for a child was to be placed in an almshouse where disease was rampant and the death rate high. In response, philanthropists and religious orders opened hundreds of founding homes and orphan asylums during the second-half of the 19th century.

After 50 years, it was evident that asylums were largely an attempt to protect society and use incarceration as a means to reform.

During that same era, The Children’s Aid Society’s response to the estimated 100,000 homeless children living on the streets of New York City was to put them on trains and transport them to the Midwest anticipating that they would have a better life. The “Orphan Train” movement had mixed results, with many youngsters welcomed into families, while still others were treated more like servants or laborers.

The Founding of The Children’s Home

Born in Sweden in 1867, John Eric Klingberg’s own childhood was marked by homelessness, hard work and hunger. Immigrating to America in 1891, he initially settled in Chicago where he was deeply moved by the poor waifs he would see roaming the dirty city streets. He wrote, “How I wished that I could care for such little ones, whom others, for days at a time, would neglect.”

In 1900, the young Rev. Klingberg and his family responded to an invitation to pastor a small Swedish Baptist congregation in New Britain. His burden for children who were abandoned and living on the streets led to the establishment of his Children’s Home just three years later. A man of exceptional faith, John Klingberg relied on God to provide for every need.

Between 1903 and 1970, more than 2,000 boys and girls came to live at The Home. Some had been orphaned or abandoned, while others came from families who were enduring economic, social or medical hardships.

Preserving Our Valuable History

The Klingberg History Museum has been established as a result of a commitment to the preservation of important and precious archival materials recording life at The Children’s Home.

In addition to hundreds of original photographs and a one-of-a-kind collection of motion pictures depicting orphan life in the United States, the archives include John Klingberg’s diaries, the beginning of an unpublished autobiography, and other writings. There are also many original newspaper articles written about the Children’s Home, clipped from papers from across the United States and Sweden. A wealth of information has been passed on by many Children’s Home Alumni who have shared their stories on film.

The Klingberg History Museum provides insights into the struggles children and families faced at the beginning of the 20th century and offers rare, personal accounts of everyday life in an orphanage.
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Klingberg History Museum

The story of the Klingberg Children's Home from 1903 to 1968

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