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## Leap of faith

By Jacky Runice Daily Herald Correspondent

Posted 11/15/2004

While many of us are wondering what we're going to have for dinner or who Donald Trump will fire next on "The Apprentice," Wayne Cramer questions how he can best help the poorest of poor Venezuelan children and their families.

How does a 25-year veteran of ComEd, who specialized in finance, go from corporate bean counter to missionary and messenger of hope?

The first step for the Ingleside resident was a no-brainer - the Zion Nuclear Station where Cramer worked for a quarter-century was closing, so he took early retirement.

On the day he turned 50, Cramer closed the books on the plant and, although he didn't know it yet, he was not only turning over a new leaf, but on the cusp of a major transformation.

"At that point, I didn't know what I was going to do with my life, so my wife and I decided to take spring and summer off to decide what kind of job I'd look for," Cramer explained.

Serendipitously, he received an e-mail from a friend whose wife was helping out with business matters at a missionary kids school in a remote Venezuelan town called Rubio. After talking to the principal of Christiansen Academy in the Andean state of Tachira Venezuela, Wayne and Susan Cramer, along with their 17-year-old daughter, Amanda, visited as a family and decided to become missionaries.

If that's not a leap, consider the fact that Amanda left her senior year at Richmond-Burton High School and graduated from Christiansen Academy in Rubio.

While in Rubio, about 10 miles from the Colombian border, Wayne volunteered for a children's program at a Venezuelan church that was led by indigenous Venezuelans and Colombians.

The pastor explained to Cramer that his people needed others willing to serve in ministries. Cramer then decided to establish a ministry of service, care and compassion, built on deep relationships with the national ministries, that would be called Andean Aid.

"We don't impose our will," Cramer said, "but ask how can we best serve you? This is your home, and these are your people."

To call inhabitants of this part of the planet poor may be an understatement.

"There's a family with 10 people in a house that's the size of my living room, a house of four walls, so to speak - one wall is carpet, another is made of tin, and the other two are made of cane and plastic," Cramer said. "We focus on educating poor children and street children many of whom are homeless because their parents may have died or their parents have so many mouths to feed they tell the older kids, like 11 and 12 year olds, to fend for themselves."

Then, there are the thousands of refugees from Colombia, caught between that country's drug runners, guerillas and paramilitary groups, who flee to Venezuela to save their lives.

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Currently, through the efforts of Andean Aid, a dozen children are receiving a first-rate education at Colegio Profesor Ciro Gutierrez Castro but Andean Aid's goal is to graduate 200 Venezuelan kids each year from the program. Andean Aid, led by Wayne Cramer, Susan Cramer, and Pastor Kerry Bauman of Chain of Lakes Community Bible Church in Antioch, IL., envisions a Christian camp and conference center where youth groups can provide wholesome programming; raising funds for scholarships for education of the needy; teaching English as a second language and other vocational training; and developing projects for children with special education needs.

"Look," Cramer explained, "We have refugees in our own hemisphere that could literally walk here. Other areas of the world have tremendous needs too, but our organization doesn't make claims to help everyone everywhere. We are focused upon this particular place."

Why would a retiree from Ingleside chuck the golf and fishing route to help build a concrete building for a family of 12?

"Kids are really the same everywhere and to see them reach their potential is better than playing any game of golf. Imagine kids getting excited about their first bathroom in the house or getting a concrete floor. To me, to go down there to serve these people - it's a wonderful life."

To learn more about Andean Aid, an Illinois not-for-profit corporation, or to schedule a presentation for your group concerning pressing needs in the Andes, go to [www.andeanaid.org](http://www.andeanaid.org) or call (847) 489-8703.

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