

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH  CAUSECAST

May 14, 2010



The advertisement banner features a dark blue background. On the left, the text 'Amazon Kindle DX' is displayed in white. In the center, there is a small image of the Kindle DX device. To the right of the device, the text '77% OFF!' is written in large, bold, white letters. Further right, the text 'WINNER PAID: \$108.15' and 'RETAIL PRICE: \$489.00' is shown in white. On the far right, the 'BigDeal.com' logo is present, with a green button below it that says 'BUY NOW' in white.

BigDeal.com/Kindle

Ads by Google

[This is the print preview: Back to normal view »](#)

Thor Halvorsen

Founder, Oslo Freedom Forum

Posted: May 13, 2010 01:21 AM

A Different Kind of Army

PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC--Most children are innocent and naïve. In the best of circumstances, they start off life unaware of its harsh realities. Children in war-torn regions do not enjoy this luxury. They are forced to grow up quickly, often seeing looting, hunger, rape, ethnic cleansing, religious intolerance, and horrific violence. What can people in distant countries do to help children in war-zones? What can children living in safety do to help children facing such difficulties and dangers? Several hundred thousand Centipede Children, and their leader Bela Gran Jensen, know the answer.

Jensen, a Norwegian born in Prague, created the Movement "On Own Feet; the Centipede Children." It is a fully-voluntary humanitarian and peace organization which allows children to help other children www.centipede.org. She founded the group exactly twenty years ago. Czech playwright Vaclav Havel became its first Patron. The project began at one school with a simple fundraising drive. Children made greeting cards and sold them to buy toys and medical supplies for children in need. This effort slowly picked up pace as more schools and more children began doing the same. The group took on the name Centipede Children. It is indeed a project carried forward by many small legs.

Ten years ago Jensen enlisted the help of the Czech military to help deliver the supplies the school children had gathered. The Czech Army General Staff, the Czech Defense Ministry and Czech peacekeeping soldiers contribute significantly to the activities of the Centipede Movement. "Not in a million years would I have imagined that the best friend of the Centipede children's peace movement was going to be the Czech military," Jensen says, beaming with pride. Not content with having the cooperation of the Czech top brass, she was invited to address an assembly of all NATO Ministers of Defense where she reminded them of the role her group could play in taking aid to children in war-torn regions.

On a visit to the Czech Republic, former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan met some of these Centipede Children. They promised to raise enough money to buy an ambulance to send to Prystina in war-torn Balkans.

What started with greeting cards became a veritable cottage industry of fundraising activities the children developed on their own. In the end, the children raised enough funds to purchase four ambulances, not one.

Jensen knows that teaching children they can make a difference is more valuable than any weapon. After all, she told me, children are innately optimistic and can overlook the seeming impossibility of repairing damage from war and civil strife.

Since it began in 1990, the Centipede Movement has spread to Slovakia, Poland, Norway and Canada with a total of more than 2,500 schools participating. Their activities include equipping children's hospitals in Eastern Europe. Since 2000, they have been in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Asia, rebuilding schools and classrooms in war-torn countries. They have also been providing these schools with text books, educational supplies, essential medical care, and classroom technology.

In Jensen's home office, there are boxes filled with awards, medals, and certificates of recognition she has received for her work with the Centipede children. But she chooses to keep a low profile. The children determine the direction of most of the activities. When the tsunami struck southeast Asia, the Centipede children decided to help raise relief funds. The Czech Ambassador to Thailand wrote back to the children informing them that the children who received aid sent their greetings and special thanks.

Sometimes the children raise \$1,000. Sometimes they raise \$50,000. Although the idea is to empower children to know they can make a difference, the financial contributions over 20 years from this movement total millions of dollars. "The Centipede children send material help, but with that, also their love," says Jensen. Today, thousands of overjoyed school children will gather in a Prague stadium to honor the Centipede movement's twentieth anniversary.

A Bohemian proverb states that one generation plants trees so that the next can enjoy the shade. Mrs. Jensen and the Movement On Own Feet has planted a forest.

Thor Halvorssen, founder of the Oslo Freedom Forum, has been the patron of the Movement On Own Feet; the Centipede Children since 2009.

