

**FEEDING THE HUNGRY
CHILDREN OF THE WORLD
TAKES THE PATIENCE OF
MOTHER TERESA AND THE
DOGGED PERSISTENCE OF
A BLOOD HOUND.**

Saint Larry

OKLAHOMAN OF THE YEAR



By Barbara Palmer

His earnest face appears on television in sixty markets across the United States; he has shared a stage with Emmitt Smith, the Dallas Cowboys running back; and used to pal around with the late Tip O'Neill in his Boston neighborhood. Even Garth Brooks returns his phone calls. But on this winter morning as he stands before a four-person TV crew in an Oklahoma City discount store, not a soul seems to recognize Larry Jones. Shoppers stop their carts and look curiously at the klieg lights, but they don't bother to ask the name of the man they are illuminating.

Granted, Jones is as plain as his name.

Dressed in a flannel shirt, casual pants, and suede running shoes, his medium build and medium brown hair make him pleasantly forgettable, someone you might see standing in line at the grocery store or on the back row of a PTA meeting. Polite and soft-spoken, whatever it is that has driven him to build one of the largest charitable organizations in the U.S. isn't visible on the surface.

The profile of his organization, on the other hand, has never been higher. In 1994, Jones's Oklahoma City-based charity delivered truckloads of donated canned vegetables, antibiotics, wheelchairs, hams, coats, underwear, water purification tablets, books, powdered milk, Christmas candy, and stuffed animals to seventy countries around the world. His organization has heated orphanages in Romania, started loan programs in the Phillipines, and supported prenatal clinics in Russia and a home for disabled children in Africa. Jones traveled to Rwandan refugee camps, to Bosnia and Croatia in the midst of war, and during last summer's trade embargo, delivered a planeload of food and medicine to Haiti just hours after President Bill Clinton announced the U.S. Marines were going in.

Here in the United States, Jones's trucks delivered millions of pounds of supplies to food pantries in places known to be wanting, like Appalachia and Harlem, and places where hunger is more hidden, like Vermont and Denver. He bought a vacant college campus in the heart of Oklahoma City and established a job training program there, then loaned one of the buildings to Head Start. His organization provided disaster relief during catastrophic flooding in south Texas and pinpointed the eight most destitute school systems in each of the fifty states and sent each student a care package at Christmas.

All of this—the \$90 million charity, the fleet of trucks, the rides sitting on sacks of food in armored cars into countries at war—has happened, Jones maintains, without any planning on his part.

"Imagine," he says, "you're standing there, and someone hands you a rope and asks you to hold it. Turns out the rope is attached to a hot air balloon, and you just go."

For fifteen years, that ride has been Feed the Children.

There were few clues that Larry Jones would grow up to be the Larry Jones of Feed the Children, says his mother Lera

Jones, a retired hairdresser who lives in Bowling Green, Kentucky. His outstanding characteristic as a child was his preternatural sweetness. "He was always super, such a good kid," she says. Neighbors praised his temperament, and teachers wrote on his report cards that they wished they had sons just like him. The doggedness that now is legendary among his friends and colleagues wasn't there then, she says. "You could sit that child down and tell him to stay right there, and he would never get up. I always thought it was me, that I was just raising him well," chuckles Mrs. Jones. "Then I had another son."

Jones's father was a barber in an old-time cut and shave shop ("he had one haircut," says Jones, "as long as you wanted that haircut, he was great"); Mrs. Jones styled hair in another shop,

and her oldest son remembers her as an artist and a perfectionist ("people drove from other states on a regular basis to have her cut their hair"). Larry, who was born in 1940, had a classic Midwestern upbringing: going to church every week, throwing two paper routes, and playing basketball whenever he could. "Basketball was king," he says.

One summer at church camp, after listening to three sermons in one week, Jones filled out a card pledging his intent to be-

come a minister. He asked a camp counselor to tear the card up the next morning, but the idea took root. "From the time Larry was twelve or thirteen, he talked about becoming an evangelist," says Lera.

He wavered only to consider becoming a professional basketball player. Not tall at 5'11", Jones was nonetheless a good enough player to be a leading scorer on his high school team. In 1956, he was the only high school junior in the state to make the All Southern Kentucky team. As a senior, he was fielding scholarship offers, including an appointment to the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

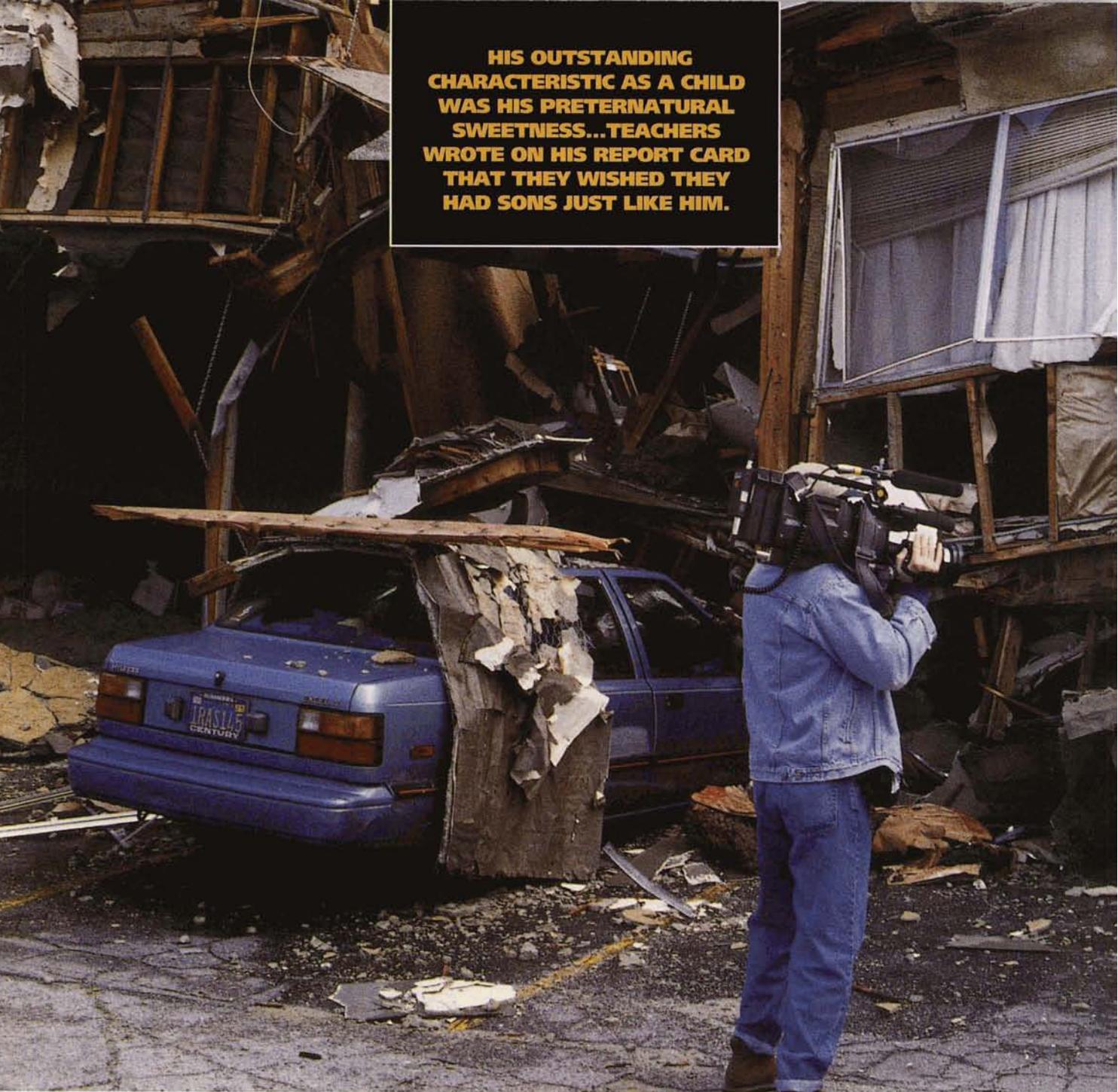
Everything changed during a scrimmage his senior year. While going up for a shot, Jones was undercut by another player, and as he went down, he broke his fall with his arm, snapping both bones in his forearm. Though not fatal to his basketball career, Jones interpreted the accident as a strong message from God about what direction his life should take. The next morning, Jones reaffirmed his intention to become an evangelist. "It was not a complicated prayer," Jones told a *Daily Oklahoman* reporter last year. "It wasn't a prayer of a lot of remorse. It was sort of like, 'I've had this life for seventeen years, and I've basically done what I wanted to. I'd like to give it now to you, Lord.' And then, I guess the only thing I can say is, peace came."

His promise meant turning down the prestigious Air Force appointment, which both his mother and grandmother argued strenuously against. "I was so determined he would go to the Air Force Academy," remembers Mrs. Jones. "I told him he could be a chaplain, but he said, 'No, Mother, I'm going to be an evangelist.'"



Oklahoma wheat farmers were first to help Jones feed the world's hungry children.

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Jones moved from Kentucky to play basketball for Abe Lemons at Oklahoma City University, where he could take pre-ministerial courses. (His decision didn't cause a rift at home: His parents drove out in the country at night to park where the car radio would receive OCU games. In the four years he was at OCU, he wrote a letter to each of his parents once a week.) Back in Oklahoma at OCU, Jones met Frances Hackler, a pretty music major from Mountain Home, Arkansas. The couple married in college and Jones went onto seminary at Phillips University in Enid. During his last year, Jones was pastor of Selecman United Methodist Church in south Oklahoma City, but there was never much chance that he would live the typical life of a Methodist minister. "I knew that he was called to be an evangelist," says his wife, Frances. "He was going to be another Billy Graham."

Thirty years ago, Oklahoma City residents Reba and Gene

Geren, both members now of the Feed the Children board of directors, were part of the Selecman congregation. The church was very small, Reba Geren remembers, and didn't pay a salary sufficient for the Joneses to buy furniture, so the congregation helped them furnish their first home. While Larry commuted to Enid, Frances hosted Bible studies in their living room. "I don't think they knew it was a sacrifice," says Geren.

As soon as Jones graduated from seminary, he and his wife and their infant daughter moved in with the Gerens and their two children so that Jones could launch himself as an evangelist. The Geren family and Larry and Frances sat around the Gerens' kitchen table, mailing out announcements that Larry Jones was available to hold revivals.

There was not as big a response as was hoped for, Reba Geren says tactfully. Jones's mother is more blunt: "Larry has always

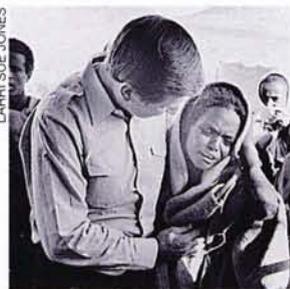


Jones surveying damage following the Los Angeles earthquake in January, 1994. Feed the Children delivered 1.7 million pounds of relief supplies to victims at the Salvation Army and local emergency centers.

in silos back in Oklahoma was contrasted vividly against the image of the hungry child. Jones was outraged that children were hungry while a 35 million-ton surplus of wheat existed in the United States. He returned to Oklahoma City, told the tale on a regional television program, and asked for wheat. The farmers who were the base of his ministry heard the request and responded. Truck drivers started calling, offering to haul the grain to Miami so it could be shipped from there to Haiti. "I woke up, and I was sending wheat everywhere," he says. "I had more wheat than I could handle."

Jones distributed food for two years before his campaign even had a name, but what started out as a sideline soon took over the rest of his ministry. It was a logical step from distributing wheat to distributing processed food and other manufactured items donated by American corporations that for varying reasons—oversupply, new product lines, the fickleness of the American consumer—couldn't sell them. Jones went with the flow. "I (had been) preaching to people to do good works," says Jones. "Well, I'd rather see a sermon than hear one."

Jones began his campaign to feed the world's children at a time when human need and television were coming together in a way unprecedented in human history. As television had brought the Vietnam



Jones in Ethiopia in 1984.

War into American living rooms, it brought images of starving children into national consciousness. During the 1980s, the hunger crisis in communist Poland (1982) was covered extensively by the American press, followed by indelible images of suffering during the Ethiopian famine in 1984. Those two events radically stepped up the volume of donations and distribution at Feed the Children. "It was as if you stopped your car at a rest stop and someone tied two jets to you," recalls Jones. Farm Aid, the organized response to the American farm crisis, and in 1986, Hands Across America, a national movement to fight hunger in America, marked the beginning of domestic distribution of food by Feed the Children. (Currently, more than eighty percent of Feed the Children's 40 million pounds of food donations are distributed in the U.S.)

Jones used television to tell the stories of hungry children and to raise money. By 1987, his weekly program was in a hundred markets across the U.S., and Feed the Children was growing by six percent a month. Then came Jim Bakker's indictment for misusing funds from his PTL television ministry, the first of a string of televangelist scandals. The public's distrust didn't discriminate: Feed the Children's donations from television viewers immediately fell twenty-five percent a month, Jones lost thirty television markets and was forced to lay off nearly forty workers.

Today, Feed the Children has not only regained momentum, it has grown beyond where it was in 1987. Its annual budget—about \$30 million in 1986—has tripled. Just as important, Jones's non-flamboyant persona, modest lifestyle, and gentle sermonizing con-

done well at everything he's ever done," she says. "He's got no stand still at all." But as an evangelist, her son was no Billy Graham. "He wasn't on (national) television, wasn't on the radio, (his evangelistic ministry) was not too big," she says. Jones himself describes it as "phenomenally smaller" than his Feed the Children organization. He affiliated himself with the Baptists for a while, rented a tent, traveled throughout Oklahoma, Arkansas, and the Texas Panhandle, and talked with about "a zillion" people at the Oklahoma state fair.

Then one evening in 1979, while attending an evangelical meeting in Haiti, Jones, then thirty-eight years old, came to a turning point. He was walking back to his hotel when a young Haitian boy asked him for a nickel for a slice of bread, saying he hadn't eaten all day. Jones gave him some money and kept walking. By the time he reached his hotel, the image of surplus wheat stored

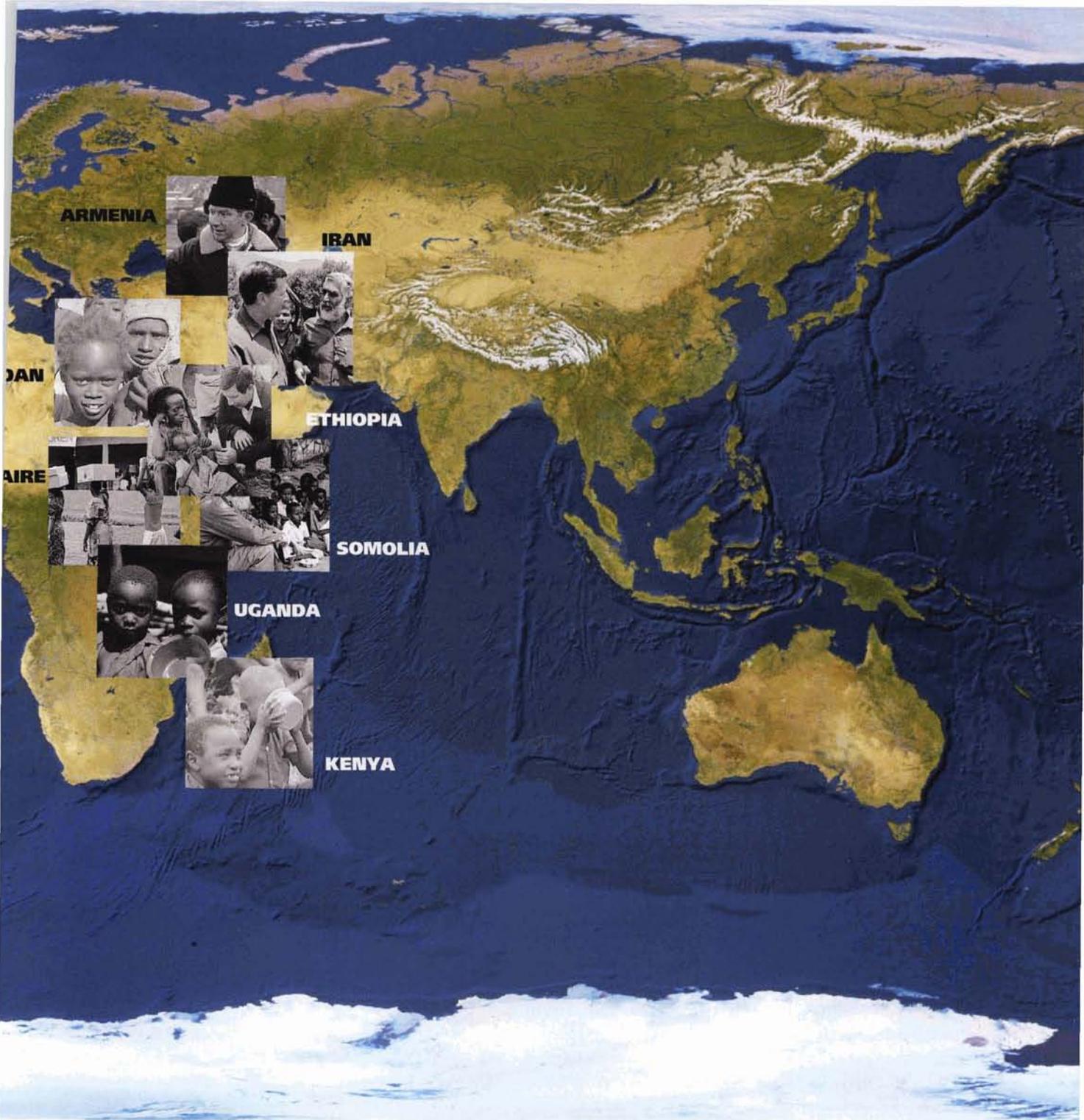


Feed the Children supports medical clinics, food pantries, orphanages, and development programs in 70 countries around the globe. In 1994, Feed the Children distributed more than 40 million pounds of food, most of it in the U.S., supplying or supplementing over 95,000 meals a day. A friend once asked Frances Jones how it felt to know so many people depended on Feed the Children daily. "I try and not think about it like that," she said.

tinue to set him apart from the Oral Robertses and the Bob Tilttons of the world. Last year, *Money* magazine rated Feed the Children the fifth best charity in international development—ahead of UNESCO. This year Feed the Children was a finalist for *Inc.* magazine's customer service award (Jones identified his customers as "every hungry child in the world"). Scores of celebrities—from Barry Switzer to Reba McEntire to Troy Aikman—make public service announcements and other fund-raising efforts on his behalf. Don Nickles is a supporter—and so is David Boren. Virtually no one seems afraid to associate themselves with Larry Jones and Feed the Children. After the 1989 earthquake in San Francisco, when President George Bush flew in to survey the damage, it was Larry Jones who stood at his side.

His organization is successful, Jones says modestly, because it has found a niche. "It's basically a distribution system." Jones almost trots down the carpeted floors of his Oklahoma City headquarters in his running shoes, conducting an interview on his feet, walking around the warehouse, commandeering a staff member's desk, happy to be anywhere, it seems, but in his own office. The headquarters, occupying a former bank building in Oklahoma City, is comfortable but not plush, furnished in a mix of post oil-bust bargains and donations (like the tasteful lobby furniture and a conference table that seats thirty).

The warehouse is where Jones is most animated, pointing out recent donations and looking almost elfin as he opens boxes to demonstrate the high quality of the goods. There are two ware-



houses in Oklahoma: a small one that's part of the headquarters and a 45,000-square-foot behemoth nearby. Inside is a stockpile of about 30,000 pounds of food, an inventory which, if things go as they should, will completely turn over within a month. Wooden pallets are piled high with an assortment that includes bottled water, candied yams, lemonade mix, nursery lamps, cans of peaches without labels, dried beans, alarm clocks, Cajun-flavored potato chips, and baby food. The baby food in particular makes Jones's face crease into a smile. In his line of work, a case of pureed carrots beats out a case of Russian caviar. "Some folks complain that when I deliver food in Bosnia, soldiers will get it," he says. "If they do, they'll be eating strained peas." There's not much that Feed the Children won't accept or can't find a need for—there

is a standing joke about thirty-two live goats, declined reluctantly only because of shipping problems. Medicine—antibiotics, cold remedies, pain relievers—are shipped to places like Haiti and Rwandan refugee camps, where an eight-day supply of antibiotics can save a life. A local pediatrician comes in to check the medications in and out; one volunteer spends hours a week just pressing antihistamines, pain relievers, and decongestants from plastic coated cardboard sheets since it is not economical to ship American packaging overseas. Donated eyeglasses, too, are assessed and sorted and taken to medical clinics overseas. The presence of the glasses, which fill up a small storeroom, is a little baffling to Jones: "I never said a word about eyeglasses. People just send them here."

The supplies at the headquarters are only a fraction of what is distributed by Feed the Children, since much of it never comes through Oklahoma City. Feed the Children's fleet of thirty-five cabs and forty-five trailers may pick up a load of oranges in Florida and take it directly to Georgia; if it is more cost effective, Feed the Children may hire another trucking company to transport it. (Part of Jones's ability to secure donations, he says, is due to his policy of picking loads up within seventy-two hours.) Conversely, Feed the Children trucks take on other commercial loads, in order to maximize their productivity.

Logistics, reasonably, is at the heart of the operation. Over at headquarters, a bank of employees spend the day, like stockbrokers, on the telephone in front of computer screens. Bill Robberson, a former banker who's in charge of procuring donations and making domestic deliveries, maintains a database of food that has been donated and a list of what is needed. The expertise of people in his department is not unlike that of commodities brokers. He describes his job as trying to get as much food as possible in Feed the Children's hands and then trying to get rid of that food as quickly as possible. "If we keep it in the warehouse (for any length of time), that's a crime."

Where the food eventually goes depends a lot on who is on the other end of his ringing telephone, says Jones. Administrators at the Federal Emergency Management Agency have his number, as does the federal agency that distributes aid overseas. Workers distributing food at a disaster site may hear of a need a county over, or a supporter like Emmitt Smith may request that food be distributed in his hometown. In disaster situations, plans on how food will be distributed are hammered out en route. "It's not like I went to college and studied for this," Jones says.

The most predictable part of Jones's schedule is the fact that, if he is in town, the first two days of the week will be spent putting together the television program that is broadcast each week. Jones writes solicitations for donations himself, scribbling key points with magic markers on cards. Film from his frequent trips around the country and overseas is edited into the show as well. Jones travels constantly, partly to make sure that donations are being properly dispensed and partly to make sure he keeps abreast of current events.

Interspersed with those stories and promos filmed inside the "Appalachian Cabin" and "Urban Alley" sets in his in-house Oklahoma City studio is footage of celebrities, particularly country and western singers and sports figures.

Larry Jones with children in Haiti in 1982. Feed the Children has supplied medicine and food to Haiti for fifteen years, sending thirty tons of food and medicine this summer alone.

Garth Brooks, Vince Gill, Brooks and Dunn, Randy Travis, Ricky Skaggs, Reba McEntire, and Travis Tritt all have arranged for fans to bring food to fill Feed the Children trucks at concerts. (The trucks have as much publicity value as generating food donations. "It takes an awful lot of single cans to fill up a truck.") Country singers are particularly empathetic, Jones believes, because many of them have known hard times themselves. "By far, the majority of them have not forgotten where they came from." Brooks is a particularly loyal supporter; a white piano he donated to Jones is sitting unceremoniously in the warehouse, its legs removed and in a nearby pile. At some point the piano, used by Brooks in a video, will be auctioned off to raise money for the charity. Reba McEntire is arranging to pass on all the Christmas gifts well-meaning fans send to her Nashville mansion to Feed the Children. "Can you imagine?" Jones asks, "People send Reba McEntire money for Christmas."



Kris Kristofferson, Larry Jones, Waylon Jennings, and Willie Nelson.

LARRY SUE JONES



**EIGHTY PERCENT OF
FEED THE CHILDREN'S
DONATIONS ARE
DISTRIBUTED IN THE
UNITED STATES.**

The thing about Larry Jones, says Geren, is that he may be spending his afternoons with Emmitt Smith and being received by foreign heads of state, but he is the same man he was thirty years ago, "The same sweet person."

"There's more pressure now," says Geren. "He'll say, 'I've got a lot on my plate' or 'I'm really swamped,' but he'd never show that to the public."

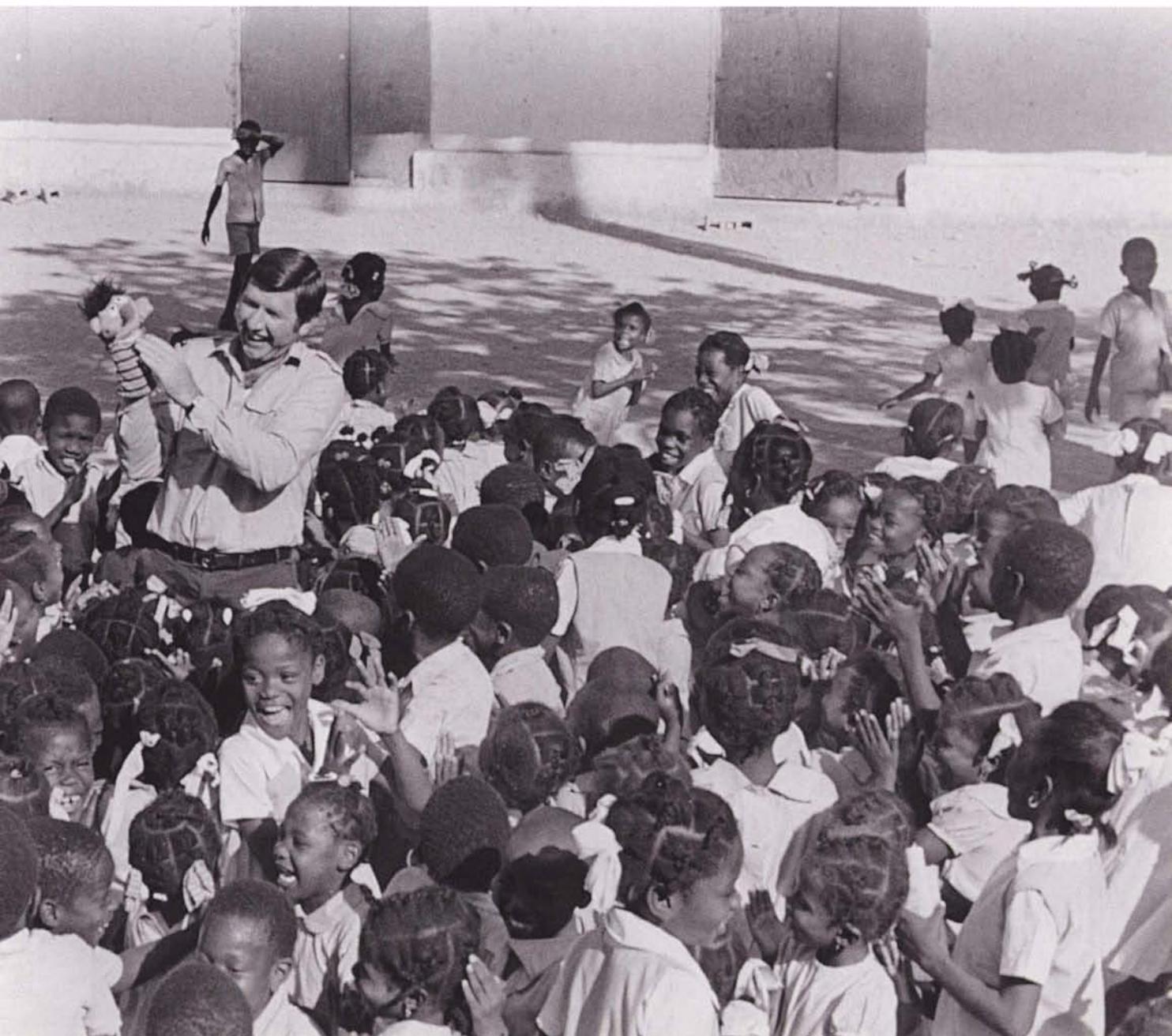
Jones's higher profile has made him the subject of intense scrutiny and something of a target. (For security reasons, the couple moved from the house where they'd lived for years into "something behind a gate," said Geren.) Jones is also frequently taken to task in public. "A woman came up to me in the airport and yanked up my sleeve to see what kind of watch I was wearing." Jones holds up his wrist. "It's a Feed the Children watch. I think

Mickey costs more." Jones's status as a frequent flyer gives him automatic upgrades to the first class section, but people complain when they see him sitting there.

Jones's response to personal attacks and media gripes is, as he puts it, "to keep walking."

"The press will keep you pure," he says, "but I'm more afraid of my mother."

Jones's salary is \$107,000 a year; his wife, a vice president, makes \$79,000. Their salaries are high compared to the people whom they help with their ministry but are about half of what CEOs of other nonprofit corporations make. "I think I earn my salary," Jones says. He works long hours—sometimes showing up at the office by 6 a.m.—and virtually every weekend. During a two-week period in December, Jones flew to San Francisco to distribute food, then to London for the meeting of the European Feed the Chil-



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—Larry Jones



Feed the Children provided relief in Iran following the 1990 earthquake, even though the U.S. didn't have diplomatic relations with that country. For that, NBC news named Jones its "Person of the Week."

dren organization's board of directors. From London, he flew to Dallas; then to Toronto to meet with Canadian Feed the Children board members; to Nashville to meet with record executives; then to Pensacola, Florida, Emmitt Smith's hometown; and then flew back to Oklahoma City on a Friday night. That Saturday, he took part in a toy round-up for a local television station and a Salvation Army food distribution. "Jet lag," he says, unequivocally, "is the hardest part of my job."

His wife begs to differ: "It's not really a job for us," says Frances. "It's a life work." (Frances's office, in fact, looks as if she lives there: she sits with visitors at a round table, her walls are crowded with framed art by children, and the air is scented with potpourri.)

Jones is frugal ("he's accused of pinching the nickel until the buffalo screams," Frances says, "but he wants to make sure every dollar has done as much as it can"), likely to drive to Penney's to buy shoes when he sees them on sale in the newspaper. "Why buy socks for \$5 when they are on sale for \$1.50?" Jones was washing his car in his driveway, wearing a bathing suit, when Ted Koppel's producer called to ask him to appear on "Nightline." He has no hobbies save reading, runs on a treadmill to stay fit, and doesn't take vacations. "Frances and I do eat out a lot," he admits (at pizza parlors, cafeterias, and hamburger chains, according to Frances).

"Larry and I are so ordinary," Frances says. "I kind of scratch my head. I can't believe God has chosen us for this." Her husband does have a gift for business, she says, but he has another, more important characteristic. "Larry has been blessed with stubbornness."

Her sweet son who once stayed put has developed a will that Lera Jones calls "brass-like."

"Larry's gotten stubborn as he's gotten older," says his mother, "because he thinks he's right. He's taking a stand."

Last summer, the Joneses flew to Miami three separate times, trying to get clearance for a plane load of supplies destined for Haiti. A green light had to be obtained from the Federal Aviation Administration, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Treasury Department, the United Nations Security Council, the Haitian president, and the Haitian secretary of health. One plane was loaded when Jones found the contract's fine print included a \$40,000 bonus for flying into a war zone. Feed the Children supporter Harry Thomason, the television producer and friend to Bill Clinton, helped Jones find another plane. The supplies were unloaded, reloaded, and Jones got clearance not long before Clinton announced he was sending troops to Haiti. (The rumor in Haiti, Jones says, was that the plane that landed in Port-Au-Prince was a Trojan horse, filled not with food and medicine, but with soldiers.) "It was about the most frustrating thing I've ever encountered," Frances says. "The average person would have abandoned it."

It is stubbornness, too, combined with outrage, that has kept Jones talking about the plight of children in Croatia and Bosnia

when much of the world community seems to have given up. He calls himself "a voice whining in the wilderness."

He tries not to discuss foreign policy or foreign governments nor affiliate with any political party, because he doesn't want to alienate any avenues for aid. "I try and look beyond the politics. My attitude is, after the crisis is over, you can go back to squabbling." But soldiers in Bosnia who put children in the sights of their guns are too much for Jones to be silent about. Two hundred and fifty thousand civilians have been slaughtered while the world watches, Jones says. (Pride creeps into his voice as Jones relates the fact that Feed the Children personnel have gotten in first in some places to dispense aid.)

His impassioned remarks last summer urging air strikes to force rebel soldiers to quit attacking safe areas prompted Jay Leno to poke fun at the headline, "Humanitarian Urges Bombing." Jones doesn't regret his comments; instead he repeats them, turning up the level of urgency each month. The capture of U.N. peacekeepers infuriated him. "Bosnia is a bloodstain," he says. "It's like the Holocaust."

Yet during the fifteen years that he has urged people to join him in feeding hungry children, he has seen a new sensitivity in Americans to the suffering of their neighbors. In Oklahoma City, for instance, a thousand people work to help a single television station deliver toys at Christmas. "If I say there's a hungry child on television, well, that's just Larry Jones," he says. "But if you go to Sunday school and someone says, 'Hey, I was down distributing food with the Salvation Army,' that's your neighbor saying it."

On the other hand, Jones sees heartbreaking levels of need daily—all over the globe. A woman working as a dishwasher owes \$600,000 in medical bills. "How is she going to pay that?" he asks. In Romania, children sleep in sewers. In Appalachia, children pick up aluminum cans for grocery money and fish out of filthy streams.

Larry Jones seems as outraged today as he remembers he was in Haiti the day his charity was born. Less food goes to waste now in the U.S. than it once did, Jones believes, but there is still an excess of food on some tables and people dying and suffering for lack of sustenance in others.

"How do you determine where the need is?" Jones asks. "Take a map, turn out the lights, and throw a dart. Wherever it lands, that's where."



Feed the Children sent three plane loads of supplies to Armenia, following the 1989 earthquake. Jones, who went in with the first plane, filled his suitcases with snack foods.

Barbara Palmer is a senior editor for Oklahoma Today; she wrote the profile of Garth Brooks, our 1992 Oklahoman of the Year. David Fitzgerald is a contributing editor to Oklahoma Today.