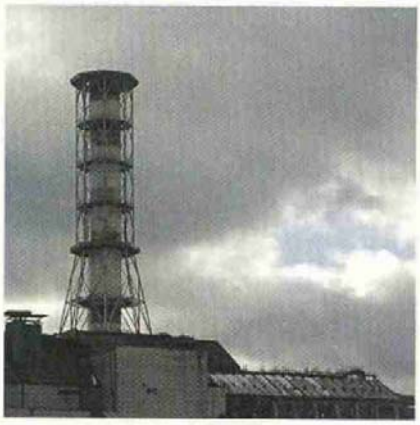


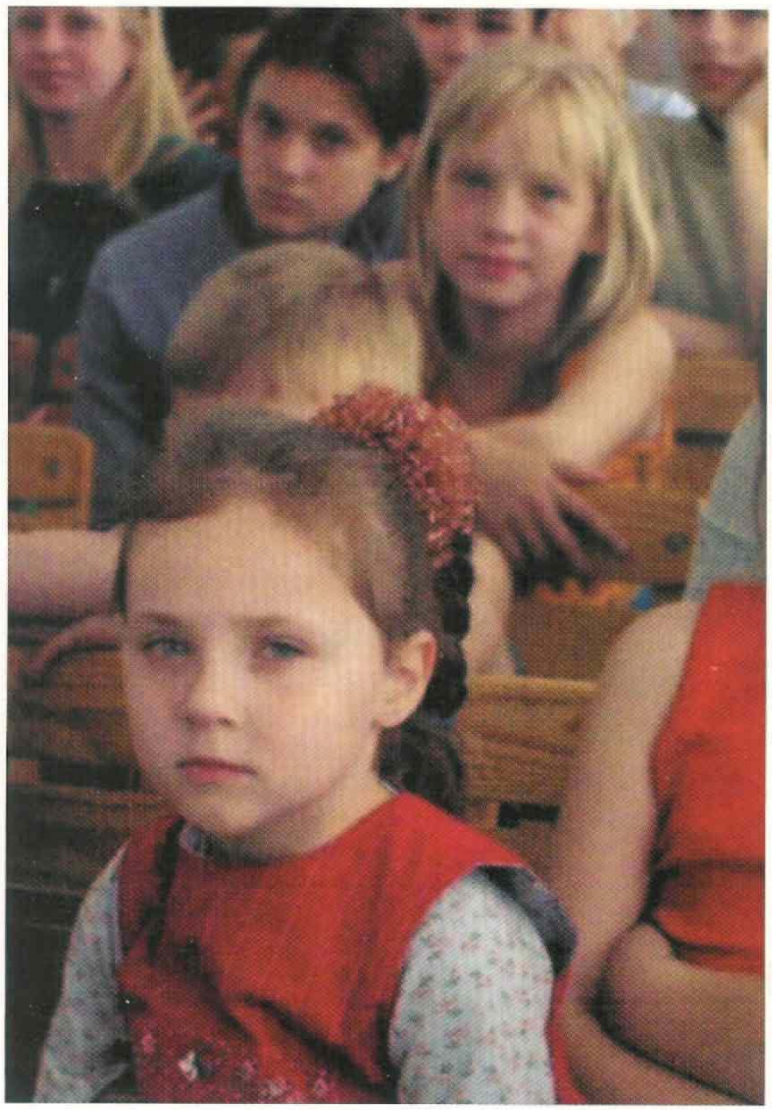
Champion *for* Chernobyl

A Rotarian helps the second-generation victims of the reactor explosion

by Michael Snyder

IT WAS AN ATTRACTIVE, indeed compelling, sight. Standing on an ornate bridge above the Pripyat River on an April evening 20 years ago, dozens of curious children craned their necks to see what exactly was emitting a strange red glow and billows of dancing steam and smoke 10 stories high. Little did the children or their unsuspecting parents realize that they were staring straight into a radioactive hell. As they strained for a better view, unchecked gamma radiation streaming from the open core of the devastated Chernobyl RBMK reactor saturated their bodies. Hundreds in current-day Ukraine, and in neighboring Belarus, where 70 percent of the lethal radioactive nuclides settled, soon died gruesomely from radiation-related illnesses.▶

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VICTOR KUBIK/LIFENETS



The next generation Children still suffer the effects of the 1986 explosion of the Chernobyl reactor (opposite).

Years passed and media attention faded. Then, quietly, second-generation consequences of the nuclear disaster began emerging. Thousands of children were diagnosed with unexplained high levels of thyroid cancer and new mental and physical disabilities. In 1993, the BBC reported that of 50,000 children living in Chernihiv, a city some 40 miles from the reactor, five out of six suffered from Chernobyl radiation effects.

Slowly, in the midst of social and economic chaos spawned by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the needs of these children passed into near-oblivion.

That is, until one future Rotarian came on the scene, joining others who were waking up to the magnitude of the disaster.

On the day the No. 4 reactor detonated at Chernobyl, Victor Kubik, then 38, was going about an ordinary day as a father of three children and pastor of two Christian congregations in Minnesota, USA. When the world heard about the explosion several days later, Kubik feared the worst for his cousins, aunts, and uncles, who still live in Ukraine. About 40 years earlier, Kubik's Ukrainian parents fled their native land, trading the terror-filled post-Nazi aftermath of World War II for secure shelter in a European displaced persons camp. With their new son, they immigrated to America in 1949, leaving their extended family behind.

"I had these terrible feelings of mixed fear and anger," Kubik recalls. His anxiety peaked when Soviet officials initially denied that there was a problem. "To me, this meant that it was likely a worst-case catastrophe scenario and that my family members were at risk of receiving no aid as a result of a politically driven coverup."

Eventually, he learned that his family was spared. Soviet officials asked for help, and with the rest of the world, his attention shifted to matters closer to home.

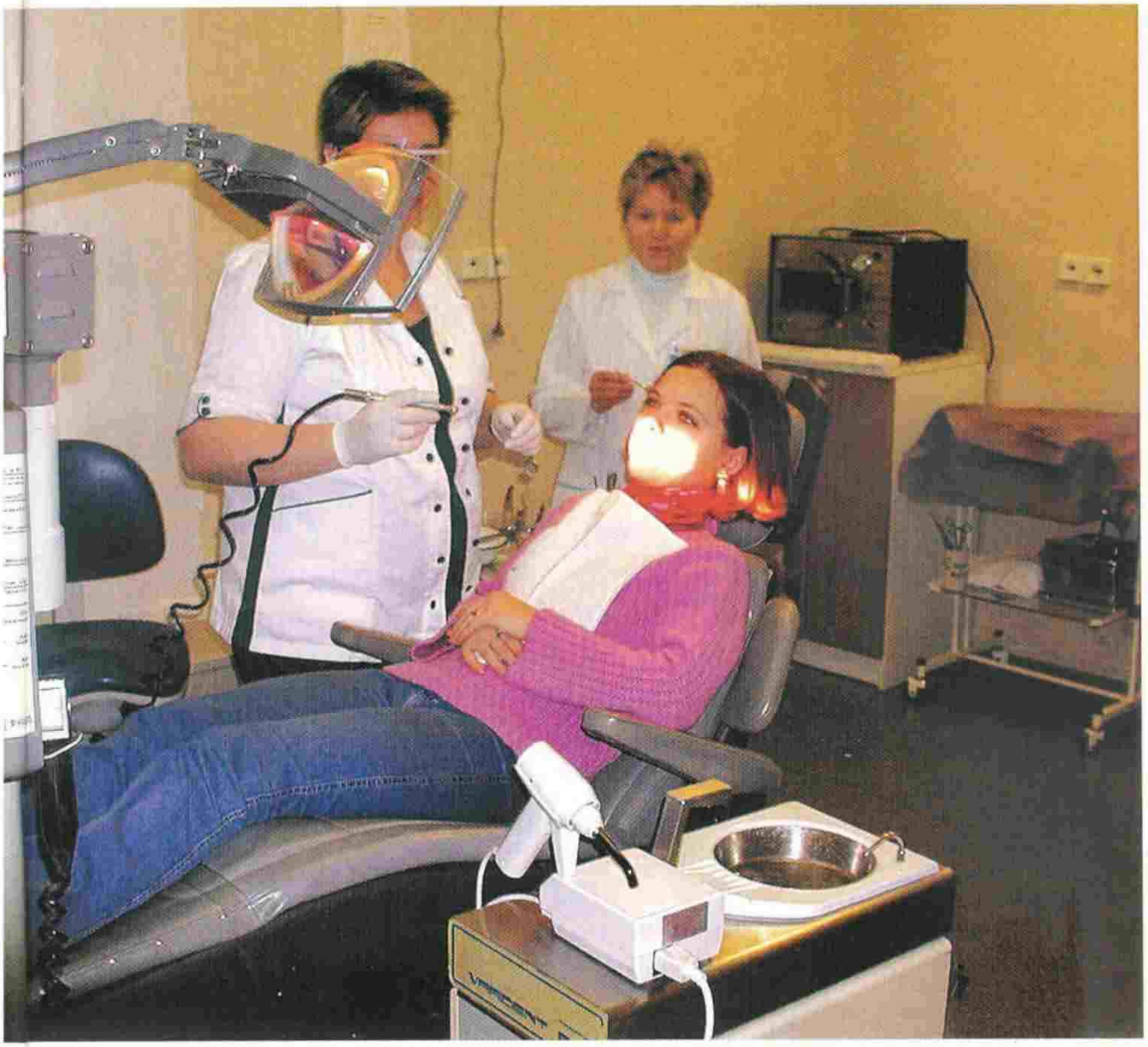
Seven years later, Kubik's ministerial duties took him to England. At dinner one night, Kubik and his wife, Beverly, met a retired British surgeon, Dr. Maurice Frohn, who specialized in thyroid issues. He told chilling accounts of a radiation-induced surge in pediatric thyroid cancer, with neglected Chernobyl children suffering in packed hospital wards. He was planning a trip to Ukraine to try to help.

"This is horrible!" Kubik recalls thinking. "Since I've been there, I know the Ukrainian culture. Perhaps I could serve as a translator." Spontaneously, he volunteered, much to the happy surprise of the surgeon.

A few months later, Kubik and Frohn stepped off a plane in Kiev. They were little prepared for what they would witness. Evidence of economic chaos from the Soviet breakup was everywhere. Chernobyl's sinister legacy quickly materialized in the form of small black boxes hung in public places. "At first, one would think they were typical

> "The scope of the tragedy came home afresh while thinking about all the children who have been affected by the radiation that blasted out of that now-sleeping atomic furnace in front of me."
>
> – Victor Kubik

Entombed city Kubik at the Chernobyl nuclear reactor site in 2003. Opposite: The Revival Centre treats children who suffer from an array of neurological disorders attributed to radiation aftereffects.



electronic displays that told you the local time and temperature," Kubik says. But they weren't. The boxes measured microrads per hour, leftover radiation from the drifting nuclides spawned by the Chernobyl meltdown.

Shortly after arriving, Kubik and Frohn were driven to the aging Polyclinic No. 2, an acute care facility in Chernihiv. The hospital served more than 600 children, double its capacity.

"It was cold and gray on a mid-April day in 1996 in Chernihiv, just 40 miles east of the doomed Chernobyl nuclear power plant," Kubik recalls. As he walked the dim and chilly halls of the clinic, his footsteps echoing against bare walls, he saw the faces of overworked nurses, doctors grimly struggling to help, children with no hope. "I knew right then that I had to do something, but what?" Kubik says. A biblical proverb reverberated through his mind: "Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in the power of your hand to do so."

On the spot he told Dr. Vasyl Pasechnick, a Ukrainian pediatrician, that he was going to help the doctor's new clinic for Chernobyl children. As much as Pasechnick wanted to, the Ukrainian doctor didn't believe that. He'd heard the same empty promise from countless others.

But something was different about Kubik. "From our first words together, I sensed a person who was genuinely interested in our problems that resulted from the Chernobyl catastrophe," Pasechnick says. "I immediately began having trusting hope in Victor as a person from whom charity and goodness flowed from a sincere heart."

Kubik returned to the United States, this time to Indianapolis, where his work had taken him. He was a lifelong volunteer for community groups like the Boy Scouts, but he had no experience in international humanitarian aid. What was he going to do?

He located a U.S. State Department program that ships donated medicine and other supplies free of charge. After a few phone calls, Kubik learned that Pasechnick's clinic, the Revival Centre of Medical Social Rehabilitation of Disabled Children in Chernihiv, was eligible.

That's all Kubik needed to know. Over the next few months he and his wife tapped every resource they could find. Living in a house equipped with laptop and desktop computers on every level, he naturally turned to the Internet. He set up a Web site, www.lifenets.org, and donations began trickling in. By 1998, Kubik had shipped US$250,000 worth of critical medicine to a surprised Pasechnick.

> "From our first words together, I sensed a person [Victor] who was genuinely interested in our problems that resulted from the Chernobyl catastrophe."
>
> — *Vasyl Pasechnick*

That was just the start. Throughout the years, Kubik's self-confessed stubborn streak paid off, as he learned to overcome governmental red tape, rampant bribery in the post-Soviet era, and funding pledges that suddenly evaporated.

With no marketing, Kubik and his growing group of volunteers collected, catalogued, and shipped more than 70 tons of medical supplies and equipment worth more than $1 million to the Ukrainian clinic.

Going global

In 1999, Kubik arranged for Pasechnick to fly to the United States to meet other pediatric doctors and medical professionals. He figured Pasechnick could tell the story much better than he could, even through interpreters.

He was right. In visits to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, St. Jude's Hospital for Children in Tennessee, and other nationally ranked children's hospitals, doctors and reporters hung on Pasechnick's every word.

At the end of the doctor's first visit, an unexpected meeting with then Indiana First Lady Judy O'Bannon led Kubik ultimately to Rotary and the expansion of LifeNets to countries around the world.

Before the hastily arranged meeting at the governor's mansion, an aide emphasized that O'Bannon could give them just half an hour. As the meeting progressed, that half hour turned into an hour, then two.

"I was quite taken with both the Ukrainian doctor and with Vic," says O'Bannon, widow of Gov. Frank O'Bannon, who died in 2003. "Victor profoundly struck me as a true servant leader, someone who could do a lot of good for people."

O'Bannon invited Kubik to join the official Indiana delegation to Russia later that year,

Remains of the day Chernobyl's Ferris wheel stands sentinel over the city, untouched since 1986. Kubik made his first visit in 1993.

and after working out some financial arrangements from his own pocket, Kubik accepted.

In the two weeks that the official delegation crisscrossed Russia, the amiable Kubik made many fast friends, including Rotarian Dick Darst, an Indiana attorney who invited Kubik to join a Rotary club.

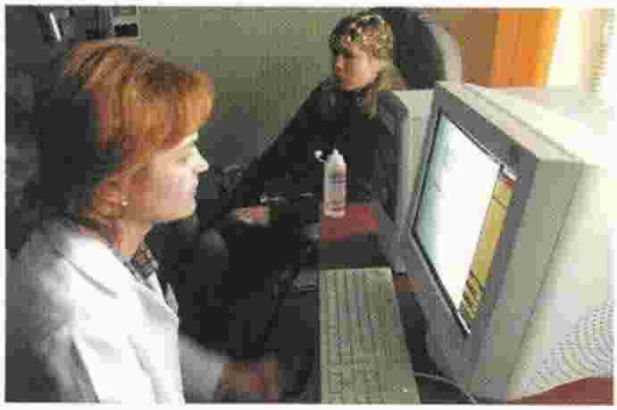
"I finally had finished incorporating LifeNets as an IRS-approved nonprofit, and I found Rotary to be of like mind in providing real service, particularly with its focus on The Four-Way Test," says Kubik, who soon joined the Rotary Club of Indianapolis Northeast.

Meanwhile, Judy O'Bannon asked him to assist in more projects, including an orphanage in Moldova. Kubik, who receives no compensation for his work at LifeNets, decided to expand.

The organization, now called LifeNets International, is a network of individuals, churches, and nonprofit groups that provides self-sustaining development aid in countries throughout the world, from Jordan to Estonia to El Salvador. "We focus on practical solutions that don't reinvent the wheel," Kubik says. Examples include scholarships for students from developing nations, new homes for tsunami victims, and microcredit for African farmers.

"People just want to be involved in what Vic is doing," says Tom Branum, RI director-elect and charter president of Kubik's club. Last year, the two Rotarians secured a Matching Grant from The Rotary Foundation for the Revival Centre. The $12,000 project paid for a Russian-language Montessori program, an ultrasound inhalator, and medicine for nerve-based diseases.

> "I found Rotary to be of like mind in providing real service, particularly with its focus on The Four-Way Test."
>
> – Victor Kubik



"Victor is a most remarkable individual and a great Rotarian," says Georgiy Kruchkov, president of the Rotary Club of Kiev-Centre, Ukraine, who helped coordinate Foundation grants for projects in Chernobyl.

News of LifeNets' work with Chernobyl spread rapidly, leading to requests for aid from countries around the world, including Malawi, where LifeNets helped build medical clinics. Kubik and his fellow Rotarians obtained a Matching Grant from the Foundation. The $44,000 effort provided two ambulances to bring patients to the clinics.

Today, LifeNets projects can be found on five continents, serving people of all backgrounds. The LifeNets Web site lists projects and ways to help.

Kubik, 58, works full-time as a minister, squeezing in LifeNets meetings and trips whenever he can. "When Vic is at the meeting, going to Rotary is like an adventure," says Jackie King, president of the Indianapolis Northeast club. Kubik's makeups at clubs around the world provide remarkable glimpses into international affairs, she says.

On the Web
Learn how other Rotary clubs are helping Chernobyl survivors at www.rotary.org/rotarian

20 years later

The original Chernobyl project remains a top priority for Kubik, who visited the reactor in 2003. The menacing image is etched in his memory. "It was awesome standing there and looking at it and realizing how [it] forever altered the life and psyche of a nation," he says. "The scope of the tragedy came home afresh while thinking about all the children who have been affected by the radiation that blasted out of that now-sleeping atomic furnace in front of me."

Kubik says that one of his greatest rewards is visiting the Revival Centre and seeing children playing with toys that he shipped over. "It's very humbling," he says in a deep baritone, "when you see laughing children, knowing you played some small role in helping them get better."

One boy, Vitaly, personifies LifeNet's work, he says. Vitaly's mother was one month pregnant with the boy when the tower exploded. "It was strongly suggested to her that she get an abortion," says Kubik. She refused.

Vitaly was born with serious physical and mental illnesses, including withered limbs. When the clinic opened, she brought her baby in. Each time Kubik returns, he marvels at Vitaly's improvement. He looks forward to seeing the boy on 14 June at the clinic's 10th anniversary celebration. LifeNets is providing $35,000 in aid, including a bus for the clinic.

"The simple fact that Vitaly can talk and smile makes it all worthwhile," Kubik says. ■

Routine tests A neurologist conducts an electroencephalogram (EEG) using equipment donated by LifeNets. All children at the Revival Centre receive EEGs on a regular basis.

Michael Snyder operates the MEK Group, a full-service communications firm, and is a member of the Rotary Club of Indianapolis.