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privileged to provide Max the charmed life that orphans can only imagine, the couple says they felt compelled to include him on future service trips.

“Our next VolunTour was in December [to Guatemala] and it was important for us to participate as a family,” Rainer recalls. “We believe that as we engage our child in positive experiences that are linked to our values, we pass those values on to him.”

Angelika says Max was “profoundly impacted” by the experience, and Max agrees.

“It’s changed me because I now think a lot more about kids who don’t have a school to go to,” he says. “Some of us don’t like to go to school and would prefer to spend the day doing what we want instead of going to school. But these kids want to go to school and want to be educated.”

Max was so moved that, upon returning home, he sought the support of his classmates to introduce the bottle school concept in a theatrical presentation. All students were required to do a term exhibition on the topic, “Decisions That Made Social Change.”

“The other classes picked other people who created social change, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Singapore’s [former Prime Minister] Lee Kuan Yew,

Rosa Parks — and we picked Hug It Forward,” Max says. “I showed my class a summary of what we did in Guatemala. My class put together a performance to show the rest of the school how I worked with the kids and elders in the village to build these schools. We used plastic bottles that we brought in from home and we mimed the rest. We spent around three to four weeks to prepare the performance.”

The bottle school presentation was so well-received that Max won the school’s Care Award. Administrators also invited him to address their Education Group about potentially adopting bottle schools as an ongoing giving project. Regardless of the outcome, Max says, his personal commitment to bottle schools will continue.

“Currently, I’m raising funds to build a bottle school,” he shares. “On my birthday in November, I asked my friends to give me a donation for that school. My friend Ivan gave me a present and an envelope with money for the bottle school — that was the best!”

“We have a really good life. And when we see others who have way less but they are happy, then we appreciate more what we’ve got and focus on other things, such as spending time with family and friends, without any electronics involved. Just outside having fun.”

HEARTS AT PLAY

How a Boy and a Ball United a Community

/// BY FELICIA FULLER

In a dirt field in rural Guatemala, children play with abandon beneath the December sky — chasing and kicking the soccer ball that 9-year-old Max Zimmermann brought with him from Singapore. Some little feet are bare; others grip frayed shoes. There’s no lush playing turf, goalposts or even a net. But none of that matters. It’s all about the love of the game.

Reflecting on that day, Max, now 10, says: “It was fun to play soccer with the kids even though we didn’t speak to each other because we don’t speak the same language. We still understood what we wanted to do.”

The fifth-grader had gone to Guatemala on a VolunTour to build bottle schools, a Hug It Forward initiative that unites residents and volunteers to construct schools using eco-bricks made from plastic bottles stuffed with inorganic trash. Max — who was accompanied by his parents, Rainer Zimmermann and Angelika Dahmen — says he was excited to serve.

His parents’ volunteer experience in Thailand 10 months earlier inspired the family excursion to Guatemala. Driven by a desire to “make a difference in the world,” Rainer and Angelika had taken a VolunTour with WorldVentures Foundation to Blessed Homes orphanage in Mae Sot. The home serves as a beacon of hope for children displaced by war in neighboring Burma. Feeling



MAX ZIMMERMANN

