

## CNN Heroes: Helping kids with Mira Sorvino

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Actress Mira Sorvino's hero is Global Fund for Children founder Maya Ajmera
- The fund has given \$9.3 million to more than 300 organizations in 65 countries
- The organization has reached more than 1 million children worldwide



Maya Ajmera "has really taken the smallest seed and turned it into a flowering forest of significance for the world," said actress Mira Sorvino. Sorvino, who is affiliated with Amnesty International and has been active in calling for U.N. action in Darfur, met Ajmera through a mutual friend who helps nonprofits.

**(CNN)** -- Maya Ajmera describes herself and actress Mira Sorvino as "kindred spirits."

"Mira is one of the most inspiring actresses in the world. And she takes on really hard causes," says Ajmera, founder and president of The Global Fund for Children (GFC).

"Her work on Darfur, her work on trafficking, and now, her work with children globally, makes us great kindred spirits.

"I think we both deeply, deeply care about the invisible," Ajmera said. "Whether they're invisible women, or whether they're invisible children, or whether they're invisible communities. We both care about these issues deeply."

Sorvino, who is affiliated with Amnesty International and has been active in calling for U.N. action in Sudan's Darfur region, met Ajmera through Larry Kopp, who assists nonprofits and advocacy groups.

Kopp introduced Sorvino to Ajmera, and the actress was impressed with the model Ajmera used to found GFC.

"My hero is Maya Ajmera, who is helping the world's most marginalized and vulnerable children," Sorvino said.

"I look at Maya and I say, 'OK, here's this woman who took an idea, and an impulse and an instinct to help, and really built an organization that has amazingly calculable, tangible effects.' And it just keeps growing and keeps getting other people on board."

### **'Moment of obligation'**

Ajmera, 40, grew up in North Carolina, a child of Indian immigrants. She was on her way to medical school after graduating from Bryn Mawr College when, at 22, she received a fellowship that allowed her to travel in South and Southeast Asia.

It was on a train platform in India when she had what she calls her "moment of obligation."

"At this train station, I saw 40 kids sitting in a circle learning how to read and write. And there was this incredible teacher teaching them.

"And what was amazing was that these kids all had like -- some of them had little siblings, babies that were just sitting there learning also.

"And I asked the teacher, 'What's going on here?' And she said, 'Well, these children live on and around the train platforms. They do not go to school. They work. They play here. And they go to sleep here.'

"And I said, 'Well, what does it cost to run one of these schools?' And she said, 'About \$400 a year for 40 kids and two teachers.'

"It was right there and then that I decided ... to make bets on small organizations and help make them stronger."

Ajmera returned to the States and, instead of going to medical school, decided to study public policy at Duke University. In 1994, she founded GFC to "put small amounts of money into innovative grassroots groups serving the most vulnerable children around the world."

Ajmera also authored a children's book, "Children from Australia to Zimbabwe." As a child, she had wanted to share her visually rich Indian culture and history with friends but had no books available that described her culture.

With the proceeds from book sales, Ajmera made a grant to the train platform school in India. Today, she has co-authored 12 books, and GFC has 22 books in the marketplace.

### **Reaching a million children**

With grants from book sales and donations, GFC has given \$9.3 million to more than 300 organizations in 65 countries, reaching more than 1 million children worldwide.

"There are 300 million children in the world who have slipped through the cracks. They are not being serviced by systems or governments," Ajmera said. "Who's going to take care of these kids? The answer is community-based grassroots organizations.

"We see the kind of impact these organizations can have. They go deep in their communities, they do great things with small amounts of money, and they need to be recognized by the broader world for their innovations.

"And I'm not just talking about what they do in terms of education. [They] tend to work holistically; they do nutrition, they do health, they do skills training, they provide the foundations of a decent life to kids who would otherwise have nothing."

Among the groups GFC is working with is one called Jedica in the Democratic Republic of Congo that helps rescue child soldiers and get them into school.

In September, Ajmera announced the Under-8 Initiative at the Clinton Global Initiative. It's a \$10 million commitment over five years to invest in 100 grassroots organizations globally working in the area of early childhood education.

And Ajmera and Sorvino hope to partner together for Darfur-related projects. Sorvino has been working to stop child and human trafficking and is active in raising money for and calling for an end to the violence and genocide in Darfur.

"Help is not always reaching our most precious, vulnerable human beings," Sorvino said. "You just want to scream and cry and do everything that you can.

"Her group is so good at scouting out those groups in all of these developing countries that really can make a difference in children's lives.

"She developed a whole book-publishing division of her group, which is all about global children and encourages a sense of a world community for children.

"Children are beautiful," Sorvino said. "Even if you're poor, we've got to show images that show their resilience and their beauty and the cultural diversity of where they live.

"In my own model as an activist on issues such as Darfur and human trafficking, I really strive to see results. Maya Ajmera has really taken the smallest seed and turned it into a flowering forest of significance for children around the world."