

HELPING HAND

Universal Leaf steps up initiatives to help the people of Brazil.

By Brandy Brinson

Universal Leaf Tabacos Limitada, Universal's primary Brazilian subsidiary, has taken an entire community under its wing to pull its people up out of poverty and seek a better life. The program is focused on the poor community of Bairro Menino Deus in the town of Santa Cruz do Sul, Rio Grande do Sul, which is one of the centers of Brazil's tobacco-producing regions. The program has been quite a success and has already received high honors from Brazilian organizations.

The project was spearheaded by Robert Jones, president and CEO of Universal Leaf Tabacos and regional director of South American operations for Universal Leaf Tobacco. Jones, who attended the University of California at Berkeley and then served in the Peace Corps in Chile, has a personal background and interest in social change.

As is often the case with big

companies like Universal, community groups approach them for donations. The companies' executives write checks, show up for ceremonies where everyone applauds, and the communities are appreciative. While this is nice, Jones was looking for a project that went beyond signing a check.

"Typically someone asks and you write a check, and there's no emotional investment—but that's not what I was looking for," says Jones. "We're always getting requests to help here and there, but what we were doing was not adequate to address the real issues."

He wanted to tackle the deep-seated troubles in the town where Universal is invested. So the company embarked on an ambitious program, going into Santa Cruz do Sul's most poverty-stricken, violent, crime-ridden community and developing a program aimed at bringing change—the Universal Leaf Citizenship Project.

The project is not a quick fix. "This is a more effective, long-term solution to a community's real problems," says Jones. "It's a multiyear commitment to develop a community."

The program was launched in 2003 and is a social management system



aimed at the establishment of a community network for the development of initiatives to improve life quality and social support for needy communities.

It is a multifaceted, comprehensive approach. “The wheel around the program on the logo symbolizes the holistic approach—it addresses everything,” says Jones.

The program includes several areas of focus—first job (opportunities), exercise of citizenship, eradication of child labor, education, health, housing/habitation, basic sanitation, environmental preservation and sport, cultural and leisure activities. The program also supports the “Hunger Zero” program launched by the Brazilian federal government.

The holistic view of the program includes social activities based on priorities defined by an association of community members.

In starting the project, Jones drew on his past experience for direction. “One of the first principles learned from my Peace Corps days in being an agent of change is that social change is one of the most difficult things to achieve.” The best way to begin, he says, is with a “bottom-up approach.”

That means that you “first listen to the community to identify who the leaders are and work with the leaders to find out what their priorities are,” he says. “You’ve got to avoid a top-down approach—imposing something we would want on a community.”

Therefore, the folks from Universal would listen and offer suggestions, but they let the community leaders identify what was important to them. Through every step of developing the program, local leaders helped plan the initiatives.

COMMUNITY CENTER. One of the first things the leaders discussed was the fact that the Bairro Menino Deus community, which has about 2,500 people, did not have a center. They had nowhere to gather for meetings, classes, sports and other community events. So Universal took on the task of building a community center.

The company says this center is one of the most important examples of social contribution of the program. The center, called

Menino Deus Community Polo, is where social programs are developed according to the needs and interests of the community.

It was built on an area of 14,000 square meters and includes a 740-square-meter gymnasium for sports and activities, two multi-use rooms, washing and dressing rooms (for men and women), and wash rooms for handicapped people.

The company also has plans to add a parking area, an outdoor stage, external areas for sports and a sand playing field. Other improvements are also planned.

FIRST JOB. One of the top priorities of the project was to help members of the community who urgently need employment. Through the First Job project, Universal undertook several initiatives to help residents obtain employment.

The initiatives include offering assistance to obtain the documents necessary for formal employment.

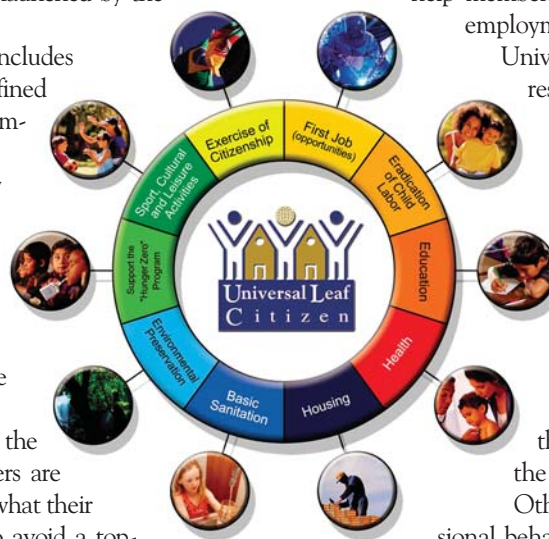
Jones says some people in the community had no paperwork—not even birth certificates—so it was difficult for them to apply for jobs. The stigma of living in that community prevented others from getting jobs. “They had not been able to get jobs simply because of their address—the crime in the area gave the community a bad name.”

Other job-training initiatives include professional behavior training programs, workplace training and support of a social work assistant to ensure individuals are well integrated into their workplaces.

The first year of the program, 60 people from Bairro Menino Deus were given their first jobs by Universal Leaf Tabacos. In 2004, 240 more people were employed.

ACTIVITIES. Another aspect of the project includes holding social activities at the Menino Deus Community Polo. In 2006, the main focus of this program was on strengthening the involvement of young people in their own growth and development as well as in the social development of their community. The activities offer social, cultural, intellectual and professional development for the participants.

Nine social projects were offered in the Community Polo, benefitting about 300 children and teenagers, and about 120



Menino Deus Community Polo social projects

Basketball Project: Carried out by the University of Santa Cruz do Sul on Tuesdays and Thursdays, it involves 120 children and teenagers from 8 to 16 years old.

IT classes: Conducted by trainees of the University of Santa Cruz do Sul on Tuesdays and Thursdays, classes involve 30 children and teenagers from 8 to 16 years old.

Menino Deus Speaks English Project: Carried out by Schütz & Kanomata Language School on Tuesdays and Thursdays with the help of volunteer service from English teachers, it has 25 participants from 13 to 24 years old.

Indoor Soccer School Project: The dwellers association organizes these activities, which take place on Saturdays and Sundays for boys and girls from 7 to 15 years old.

Capoeira classes: Fundação Gazeta manages these classes on Wednesdays from 1 to 3 p.m. at the Polo gym.

Craft classes: Classes are carried out by Fundação Gazeta on Wednesdays from 1 to 3 p.m. at the Polo.

Community Games Project: Managed by the dwellers association of the Bairro Menino Deus, this project makes available the Polo building for the people of the community to practice everyday sportive activities from 6 to 10 p.m.

Social Management Project: Carried out by Universal Leaf Tabacos and the dwellers association, this project supports technically and also with materials the management and running of the Community Polo, besides establishing new partnerships to develop projects considered vital to the community.

adults, most of whom were housewives and the elderly.

One of the activities was a Christmas party volunteers organized at the community center for 1,100 poor children. They had lunch and a visit from Santa Claus and also received Christmas gifts.

SOCIAL RESEARCH. Universal is also conducting a research project to document the present social environment of people living at Bairro Menino Deus.

The research task force is composed of volunteers selected from Universal employees, residents of Bairro Menino Deus and soldiers from the Brazilian Army. The information obtained from this research will become part of a social database that will give direction to the future actions of the program.

VOLUNTEER SERVICE. Universal also encourages its employees to give to the community. The company is active in supporting integration, experience exchanges and citizenship efforts from its collaborators, board of directors and the communities in which it operates. Therefore, the company encourages volunteer service on social projects initiated by the company. "Besides helping needy communities, these activities improve interpersonal and professional relations, and they constitute learning experiences," the company says.

Jones says employees in Brazil were given one paid day off each year to donate their time to the Citizenship Project in whatever way they chose.

SUCCESS. The first edition of the Universal Leaf Citizenship Project has benefited 700 families of Bairro Menino Deus.

"Overall the community has responded well. One of the real big pleasures I've seen is the tremendous increase in the self-esteem of the people in the community and their assertiveness in talking to the mayor and other governmental officials about their rights," says Jones. "Also, the general reaction in Santa Cruz has been positive. Crime has decreased significantly within that community. There are better homes and they've made improvements."

Eventually, he says, "We'd like to see it develop into more of a middle-class community."

The project has caught the eyes of national groups as well. The project was officially recognized as a positive example of a social program. In 2006, the project was awarded with the "Top Cidadania" prize, an important award from the Human Resources Brazilian Association (ABRH-RS). The award is given to social programs that are considered examples to be followed by other communities.

ELSEWHERE. Thanks to this success, Universal is starting up similar projects in other areas of Brazil as well as in Argentina.

Universal strives to assist all the communities in which the company is active. "Universal Leaf Tabacos contributes to the development of the

regions in which it operates, respecting cultural diversities and trying to correspond to the expectations of different groups with ethics, receptivity, partnership, open communication and development of ini-

Historic preservation

Universal is also involved in the preservation of the Cultural-Historic Patrimony, through the Casa Textor Project.

"For Universal, protection and preservation of cultural values and patrimony are ways to keep an identity and preserve a nation's culture for the benefit of its people," says the company.

In Brazil, the company decided to restore Casa Textor, a historic building from the 19th-century German colonization of the region. It was restored according to the conceptual principles of the Letter of Venice, 1964—official principles guiding the preservation and restoration of ancient buildings. The house was built in 1870 with eclectic architectural characteristics and represents Portuguese architectural features, which are unusual for this region. It is the oldest house remaining from the original German settlers. The house plan is simple, and it was constructed of wood and irregular sandstones, typical of the region. It has been visited by educators, students, clients, journalists and members of the community.

tiatives aiming at social changes. This is why Universal Leaf Tabacos has ongoing social support programs and projects focused on key areas like culture, education, citizenship, environmental preservation and social and human continued development," says the company.

Next, Universal is launching a similar project in the town of Joinville, Santa Catarina state, Brazil, where it opened a new factory two years ago. "We feel confident enough of the program to begin one there," says Jones. He says the company has identified a specific low-income community there for the project.

The company also has four centers of agronomy in Santa Catarina and plans to implement a version of the social project in these rural areas.

In September, Jones will announce a similar project in Argentina. The project will take place in the town of Jujuy, where Universal inaugurated a new factory with its Argentinean partner in June.

As the company moves on to focus on other areas, Jones says he hopes that the communities will be able to continue thriving. "When we get into this, we don't want it to be a paternalistic system. We want to set it up so that we can eventually leave and they can direct their own destiny. We don't want it to fall apart when we leave and move on to other communities."

Universal can't stay involved forever. Jones says it is not just an issue of money—a lot of human resources are devoted to the project. The company had to designate a person working full-time on the project.

Jones says that in the age of globalization, it's important for companies to make social investments in the areas they operate "in an effort to better distribute the benefits to the people you're working with on a day-to-day basis."

Ultimately, the projects benefit the companies. "Our success depends on the communities we work in. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link."

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