

"Now she's not a nameless, faceless beggar; she's Tanya. We know this woman and we know her dad. We've eaten with her in her little shack down in the slum. She's got dreams and hopes and goals just like the rest of us."

—MARK VOLKERS

Surviving the slums



Dordt professor documents intense global poverty: 'The Fourth World'



John Wagenaar of Orange City, Jim Volkers of Holland, MI, Mark Volkers of Orange City and Jess Brauning of Sioux Center stand with Tanya, a disabled Guatemalan woman who survives by begging on a street corner. Tanya lives in La Limonada. Her appearance in Volkers' documentary "The Fourth World" is a story of courage and endurance. Volkers is an instructor of digital media at Dordt College in Sioux Center. (Photos submitted)

BY LINDSAY HOEPFNER
STAFF WRITER

Mark Volkers will never look at a beggar the same way again.

The instructor of digital media at Dordt College in Sioux Center first encountered Tanya on a street corner in Guatemala City.

The woman, who was confined to a wheelchair after being shot and paralyzed from the waist down during a drug deal gone bad 10 years ago, resides at La Limonada, a slum in Guatemala City.

She is forced to make a living by begging. A steep one-mile ravine home to 60,000 people, La Limonada is the largest slum in Central America. In comparison, Sioux County has about half the population in 768 times the space.

"We spent a week with this woman. We spent time down in the slum, got to know her dad and saw how she gets ready in the morning to go to work. Her dad has to push her up this steep ravine to get her out of the slum every morning, and then it's about a two-mile push into town. He's not well," said the 47-year-old Volkers, who has worked at Dordt since 2005. "We walked the whole thing with cameras rolling through the traffic, through the SUVs, Mercedes and BMWs weaving around this little lady in a wheelchair until we got to the corner where we first met her. But guess what? Now she's not a nameless, faceless beggar; she's Tanya. We know this woman and we know her dad. We've eaten with her in her little shack down in the slum. She's got dreams and hopes and goals just like the rest of us."



For More Info.

Check out "The Fourth World" website, www.fourthworldfilm.com, to view the trailer and find links to the documentary's Facebook, Twitter and Vimeo pages.

founded six years ago.

"It's a story about slums and the people who live there, but told from a different perspective. I let these people tell their story," Volkers said. "A lot of documentary films are telling stories about them, so this one I think is told from a different perspective. It's them telling stories about them."

During his three-year journey to complete the documentary, Volkers visited three primary slums: Mathare Valley in Nairobi, Kenya; Las Piñas near Manila, Philippines; and La Limonada. He also used supplemental footage from Managua, Nicaragua; Mumbai, India; and Dakar, Senegal.

About one-sixth of the world, more than 1 billion people, live in slums. The number is quickly and quietly growing and is expected to soon reach 2 billion, Volkers said.

He decided it was time to get the statistic out. Living in Africa for seven years and traveling the develop-

AT A GLANCE:

Name: Mark Volkers
Position: Instructor of digital media at Dordt College in Sioux Center
Age: 47
Residence: Orange City
Education: Bachelor of religious education degree in theology from Reformed Bible College in Chilliwack,

British Columbia, in 1988; master's degree in journalism from Wheaton College Graduate School in Wheaton, IL, in 1990; doctoral degree in communications from Wayne State University in Dearborn, MI.
Experience: Missionary in Africa, 1985-87 and 1991-96;

communications director for Christian Reformed World Missions in Grand Rapids, MI, 1996-2005.
Family: Wife, Janelle; three children, Elsa, 21, Lauren, 19, and Colin, 14.
Interests: Reading, traveling and eating international food.

ing world as a photojournalist and documentary filmmaker for 10 years, Volkers saw extreme poverty.

"Through all of that I had a lot of exposure to slums and poverty," Volkers said. "It's a story I wanted to tell."

During his quest, Volkers, along with 10-12 Dordt students took weeklong excursions to each location and documented the life of a family or individual.

"In Manila, for example, we were with a family that lives under a bridge, literally tucked up in the rafters under a highway bridge," Volkers said. "We spent the week with them and we got to know the family. They dig in the garbage all week long — that's their job."

Volkers became friends with each of his subjects, and wants viewers of his documentary to see them as normal people.

He finished editing the documentary using the video editing program, Avid, about three weeks ago.

"My experience in these slums that we filmed in and from many years of traveling slums is these are not lazy people. They're hardworking people who want nothing more than what you and I want — a better future for them and their children. That's really all they want," Volkers said. "The message of 'The Fourth World' is one of potential and optimism, to make viewers rethink what they know about intense global poverty."

Although Volkers said it was "a wonderful feeling" to complete "The Fourth World," he still has much work ahead of him.

"In some senses the work now just begins," he said. "Post-production is done, but now getting it out to the world, that's a whole other ball game."

Volkers has begun entering the documentary in some of the top international film festivals — Toronto, Amsterdam, Hong Kong, Cannes, France, Atlanta and Sarasota, FL, to name a few.

"What you do is you apply and then you wait to see if they want you or not," Volkers said. "The rejection rate for an independent film is sort of like authors trying to get their scripts published. You're going to get a lot of rejections before you get an acceptance, so I'm in that mode right now of waiting."

Volkers has a second plan of trying to get his film sold at MIPDoc, where key international buyers, sellers, producers and commissioners of documentary and factual programs can easily discover new content, network and do business.

The event is held following the Cannes Film Festival, and as far as Volkers knows, is the largest international documentary buyers market.

"International buyers from all over the world looking to line of programming for the year come from BBC, PBS, Discovery, Australian Broadcast Company, Canadian Broadcast Company, Japan and China," Volkers said. "To get your

film to Cannes and to have a chance of selling it, you really need a good agent, so right now I'm trying to find a really good agent who will take my film to Cannes, and hopefully, sell it at MIPDoc."

In the meantime, however, Volkers cannot showcase "The Fourth World."

"I can't do a public screening, because some of these top-shelf festivals have pretty strict rules. If you've had a public screening you can't get in," he said. "I'm in this weird position where I have a finished product but I can't do anything with it for awhile."

That does not mean Volkers is not already thinking ahead. "I already have a team on board to develop a curriculum, so what we'd like to do is make a six-week DVD-based curriculum for young adults, maybe junior high and up, where in a very engaging fashion they can take six weeks and study global poverty with a curriculum built right in," he said.

While Volkers has a specific goal in mind of what he wants viewers to get from "The Fourth World," he also became more knowledgeable and compassionate during his three-year quest.

"It just reaffirmed something that I had been learning over the years, that there really isn't much difference between all the people on planet Earth," he said. "We all have the same goals and desires, and this idea of thinking one group of people is better than another simply because they have more money, that's ludicrous. Gratitude should be what we feel, not superiority." ♦



'The Fourth World':

Mark Volkers, instructor of digital media at Dordt College and director of the recently completed documentary, "The Fourth World," put thought into creating a title.

"There's First World, Second World and Third World, and when you get to the Third World, there's really one more step you can go, and that's the slums of the developing world, which I'm calling 'The Fourth World.'"