

KARMA YOGA

How a western scientist followed his heart to find a way to help empower a village community in rural India.

Koen Van Rompay, 42, is not a social worker, teacher or saint.

He's an AIDS researcher who works in a lab at the University of California, Davis. But when he made his first trip to India a decade ago he came face-to-face with people suffering from AIDS, poverty, hunger, illiteracy and alcoholism.

Van Rompay was overwhelmed by the poverty and illness he witnessed first in Chennai (formerly the city of Madras), then in remote villages to the south. He had to ask himself: Can one person really make a difference? Van Rompay said he had no choice but to try.

"I was eager to go to India," he said in a later interview. "I had not been outside Europe or the U.S.A. – it was my first trip to a developing country. I was really shocked to see the poverty. It is hard to describe, especially the children living on the streets begging for money.

"I felt very frustrated; it wasn't right. It wasn't just. But I thought, 'Look, I am a laboratory scientist, not a social worker, not a politician,'" he said.

Van Rompay was born in Belgium; his name is Flemish. A veterinarian, he came to UC Davis 17 years ago to work with other HIV/AIDS researchers. He went to India to take part in an international AIDS conference.

"I felt I had to do something," he said. "I could go back to Davis and just close my eyes and try to forget all the poverty and all those poor children, or I could really try to stand up and be a voice for them."

He began modestly by helping an Indian friend and social worker, Durai Selvam, director of a small self-help program,

READ (Rural Education and Action Development) in Southern India. The program enabled young women in Selvam's village to make and sell hand-embroidered greeting cards.

"He sent me 20 cards and I sold them for him and asked for more," said Van Rompay. "The first year we were able to raise \$1,000, which here in the U.S. wouldn't be that much but in India I'm amazed at how much you can do with \$1,000."

Van Rompay went back to India the following year, to Selvam's village of Vilandai, next to the city of Andimadam, six hours south of Chennai in the state of Tamil Nadu. Let's just say it's remote – to the extent that Van Rompay is frequently the first European some villagers have seen. He has returned to Selvam's village every year for the past decade.

Van Rompay says American dollars go a long way in India, where a teacher in a rural school gets by on about 75 cents a day.

The money going to Selvam's project is helping to educate village children and is creating empowering if modest jobs for women. It takes about six months for a young woman in the village to learn to embroider the cards.

The women – usually high school drop-outs between the ages of 16-20 – are paid a stipend during the training period, which makes their parents very happy. The girls also can enroll in other training programs, such as tailoring and typing.

"It's amazing how much of a difference you can make," said Van Rompay.

Selvam's rural village now has a computer and Internet connection – courtesy

of Van Rompay – to make communication between the two men easier.

"We communicate almost on a daily basis," said Van Rompay.

Van Rompay has learned that he's skilled at putting together people he knows with people who need help.

"So I decided to go one level higher and in 1999 created a non-profit organization called Sahaya International," said Van Rompay. You can read all about it at www.sahaya.org. Sahaya is Sanskrit for "help."

Van Rompay says Sahaya International, headquartered in his apartment on Portage Bay Avenue in Davis, has been able to raise \$10,000 to \$20,000 a year by selling the embroidered cards and holding progressively bigger and bigger fundraisers. As word spread about the good work being done by Sahaya, more and more people volunteered to help, first with a series of garage sales, then with a fund-raising dinner at International House, Davis, in 2006. These attempts at publicity and fund-raising were amazingly successful. Sahaya's most recent dinner, held in June, raised more than \$20,000 that will go toward construction of a new school in the village.

Van Rompay is also recognized in his home country, where he was named the 2006 Alumnus of the Year by the University of Antwerp for his Sahaya work.

"I spend my evenings and weekends working for Sahaya," said Van Rompay. He admits being a little surprised at the turn his life has taken, considering that he has no training in sales, publicity, grant-writing or fund-raising.





He is so committed to his village that he financed the construction of a guesthouse there and plans to retire in India someday.

When you talk to Van Rompay, he might begin by telling you about the success of the greeting card project, but that will lead to a discussion of the orphan AIDS project he's organized. There are hundreds of children in the Andimadam area who have lost one or more parents to AIDS. Many of these children are now being cared for by their grandparents or an extended family member.

Two years ago, a half-dozen people in Davis sent \$30 a month to Selvam's village to feed and educate an AIDS orphan. Now there are nearly 100 people – in Europe and Northern California – sponsoring orphans. Van Rompay supports three village boys.

"Through Sahaya's orphan sponsorship program, I have three sons in India," he says.

Sahaya and READ also have developed HIV prevention and treatment programs in the village.

"We try to make sure people have awareness of how HIV is transmitted," said Van Rompay. "They think it's transmitted by shaking hands or by mosquitoes and people who are infected are shunned. We have to help those who are infected," he said.

Today, everyone has heard about the devastating effects of the AIDS epidemic. But Van Rompay offers people a tangible real-world way to help.

"Koen learned early on how to put the ripple effect in motion," said volunteer Guy Turner of Davis. "He has a talent for involving other people. The people he talks to talk to other people who involve other people who feel compelled to help.

"One by one we become an army," Turner added.

Van Rompay said he is balancing his Sahaya work with his work as a scientific researcher.

"Sometimes if the demands on my time become too overwhelming I just look at my notes and at the photos of the children in India and that gives me plenty of energy to continue," he said.

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