I often have wondered where that perception comes from — and could it be true? How do the children manage to look happy, especially if they have lived through war, death, destruction, a disaster, displacement, or they have seen violence and atrocities? Under the smiling façade, what’s really going on? And how are we called to respond as a community of caregivers committed to continuing Jesus’ mission of love and healing?

Pope Francis, in 2013, offered guidance: “[We] gather in prayer and in a spirit of penance, invoking God’s great gift upon the beloved nation of Syria and upon each situation of conflict and violence around the world. Humanity needs to see these gestures of peace and to hear words of hope.”

In his words, we see our activities, our health clinics and mission programs offering “words of hope” in places of violence and disaster.

During the building of the St. Francis de Sales Hospital in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, an undertaking overseen by Catholic Relief Services with funding from Catholic Health Association members, I met Robin Contino, LCSW-C, who works for CRS. When we first met, she was a project manager on the building of the hospital. In getting to know her, I learned about another project she works with and is undeniably passionate about — the CRS partnership with U.K.-based No Strings International, a program that uses puppetry for children among refugee populations in Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq, in a variety of conflict and disaster contexts. The idea is to promote peace-building and to address the trauma these children have experienced.

CRS is the official international humanitarian agency of the Catholic community in the United States, and the official overseas relief and development agency of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, as well as a member of Caritas International and the National Catholic Development Conference.

Contino now serves as technical adviser for psychosocial support and well-being in CRS’ humanitarian response department. She told me more about the No Strings program, and I offer the information to you as a sign of how we are serving our brothers and sisters in a war-torn part of the world.

PROGRAMMING WITH PUPPETS

Since 2013, CRS has partnered with No Strings International to produce tools for child-friendly programming in its ongoing response to the protracted crisis in the Middle East, Contino explained. To address the trauma Syrian and Iraqi children have experienced because of war and the displacement of their families, CRS uses two films, “Red Top, Blue Top” and “Out of the Shadows,” with an accompanying puppet-based methodology to increase well-being and enhance social integration among children who have experienced psychosocial distress.

The films are unique and show a world that is imaginary but similar to the culture in which the children live. Each film tells a story and tackles difficult and sensitive topics. Because only a trained and certified facilitator can show the film, the children who view it are helped to participate in a forum that develops and strengthens social connections and delivers key messages about ac-
cepting those who are different ("Red Top, Blue Top") and facing or over-
coming fears ("Out of the Shadows"), among others. After children see the
films, they take part in creative ac-
tivities using puppets to reinforce the
films’ messages. The children interact
with the puppets to express ideas and
feelings, and then they create their own
puppets. The primary target group for
No Strings is conflict-affected boys and
girls ages 6 to 12 years.

The films were created to ensure a
high level of relevance to the intended
audience, drawing on field-level con-
sultations regarding the key messages,
scenery design, props, scripts and the
puppet names, costumes and appear-
ance. In addition, the films are pro-
duced in the local language, and the
stories are built on local knowledge
and coping mechanisms.

As part of the program, CRS and
partners are training hundreds of
teachers, counselors, community
workers and animators in this innova-
tive puppetry method designed to help
thousands of violence-affected chil-
dren improve their resiliency. The No
Strings methodology seeks to normal-
ize children’s feelings; enable children
to recognize and understand different
emotions; and provide a forum for en-
gaging with others and feeling empow-
ered.

Key activities include:
■ Training for key stakeholders on
identifying and responding to the psy-
chosocial needs of children through
puppetry and other tools
■ Supporting trained stakeholders
through the implementation of action
plans in their schools, community-
based organizations or child-friendly
spaces
■ Monitoring the use of the pup-
petry methodology and providing ad-
tional support as necessary and on a
case-by-case basis

CRS has evaluated the program
and found participation in No Strings
resulted in a range of positive changes
in children. The qualitative data shows
that children, parents and animators
noted positive outcomes in children,
ranging from less fear to less aggres-
siveness with other children and stron-
ger social relationships.

This program is so important, said
Contino.

“The children have experienced
atrocities we can’t imagine and con-
tinue to live in uncertainty day after
day. Families fled their homes and sup-
port systems with the dream of one day
returning home or creating a better life
for their families, though the reality
of living in a context of extreme con-

flict is volatile and difficult,” she said.
“Families are struggling economically
and emotionally. Stress is high, and out-
lets for release of that stress are slim to
none.”

People who do not live in this type
of environment might not understand
sustainable employment and safe ac-
 commodation are constant challenges,
Contino pointed out. Refugees are not
guaranteed basic needs and human
rights. Bullying and tension in the host
community is a daily struggle for many,
and their economic distress increases
the risk of children dropping out of
school to try to earn extra money for
the family. No Strings and related ac-

tivities provide much-needed support
for the protection and future of the
children and their families.

As a counselor, Contino reminds
us that children are constantly learn-
ing, forming and growing — they ab-
sorb and emulate what they see and
hear. Living in an environment where
social cohesion is compromised has a
significant effect on their develop-
ment of a worldview, of trust, of mean-


 CRS and No Strings International
are helping children where the waters
have been muddied. And to associates
in Catholic health care, Contino em-
phasized the need for them to care and
to continue prayers and donations to
programs such as this.

“Kids everywhere are kids just like
our daughters and sons,” she said.
“They want to play, deserve to play
and to have boundless opportunity to make
their lives and our world better. We
share the same air, time of life, his-
tory and hope for the future. We need
your members to care and act to effect
change in the lives of these faraway
children, because it’s our world, our fu-
ture and our challenge. If we don’t care
—or who will?”

BRUCE COMPTON is senior director
of international outreach, the Catholic
Health Association, St. Louis.