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Responses by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to questions submitted by
GLMR International Press Agency

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1. What were your dreams as a child?

I was born and did much of my growing up in China. John Grant, my father, was there helping the Chinese set up their first school of public health and to make primary health care available - - for the first time -- to that huge country's millions and millions of poor. I think I inherited my father's optimism about the possibility of a better life for all people and, from an early age, I realized that I, too, wanted a life of international service.

2. Have you accomplished what you set out to do?

As long as grinding poverty and gross underdevelopment consign a billion human beings to half-lives of illness, hunger and unrealized potential; as long as 14 million children die each year of largely preventable causes, one's sense of accomplishment remains necessarily quite modest. On the other hand, remarkable progress has been made -- child mortality rates have been halved and average life expectancy has increased by a dozen years since 1960. If I've accomplished anything as Executive Director of UNICEF, it's been to help push children's needs higher on the world's agenda.

3. How do you see the mission you have undertaken?

My mission comes down to this: to promote a new ethic among my fellow human beings, one that says children's essential needs deserve a "first call" on society's resources, in good or bad times, in war or peacetime. It sounds simple, but it will take a kind of revolution to get there.

4. Do you believe that you have a certain power to wield and if so, which one?

Even in these days of a strengthened United Nations, the power of a UN Under-Secretary-General, the power of UNICEF's Executive Director, is limited -- and rightly so. The power that interests

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me isn't personal; it's the vast power of international co-operation between governments and peoples, something we are only beginning to tap to promote human progress. But UNICEF has a good reputation worldwide; people believe in us. That gives us the power to be heard and to persuade and influence people on behalf of children.

5. Have other people's attitudes towards you changed in any way?

I've been criticized by friends and colleagues for wanting to accomplish too much, too fast, for making too much noise about the things I'm passionate about. In recent years, as the pace of improvements in children's lives has increased worldwide, much of the criticism has abated. There's more of a consensus about how to achieve our common goals.

6. Do you ever feel lonely?

I don't have much time to feel lonely. My two families keep me pretty busy: the immediate family of wife, three grown-up sons and their families, plus the extended family of UNICEF's five thousand staff and the children we serve around the world. My life's pretty much a whirlwind of activity. But, being human, there are moments when the existential reality of aloneness, of individual frailty and mortality come upon me. There is also a lonely feeling when the buck stops at my desk on a particularly difficult decision, often involving the lives of children in emergencies.

7. Can one remain simple and how would you define simplicity?

Life is essentially complicated, but it is easier to keep things simple when your life's work revolves around children. When talking to the adult world about our responsibility to meet children's needs, I try to keep the message as simple as the children whose spokesman I've become. It boils down to nurturing. What could be more basic?

8. What does the word 'ethics' mean to you?

Ethics is the reflection of the conscience of the times in which we live, the sense of right and wrong, good and bad that evolves as civilization develops. We know perfectly well how to save the lives of most of the 40,000 children who will die today and tomorrow; not to save them is immoral, an obscenity. The great Italian writer Primo Levi cautioned us that once we know how to relieve torment and do not do so, we join the ranks of the tormentors. Ethics must march in step with changing capacity.

9. What are you most proud of?

After my sons, I'm most proud of the World Summit for Children, which was held in September 1990. Helping organize that first-ever global meeting of leaders from North, South, East and West was one of the high points of my life. I'm convinced history will look on that event as a turning-point in humankind's treatment of the young.

10. Do you have any regrets?

I mainly regret that there are only 24 hours in each day.

11. What holds the most important place in your life?

My work and family tie for first place; skiing and laughter come in second and third.

12. How do you see the future of the planet?

I agree with the historian Arnold Toynbee, who said: "Our age is the first generation since the dawn of history in which mankind dared to believe it practical to make the benefits of civilization available to the whole human race." We can take a giant step in that direction if we keep the promise of the 1990 World Summit for Children and fulfill the expectations raised by the recent Earth Summit. Are we prepared to nurture our children and preserve our environment? Are we prepared to eradicate poverty once and for all and build a truly peaceful world? I believe we are stumbling in the right direction, but we must work harder and faster to make it happen.

13. What in your opinion is the thing that most urgently needs changing in the world?

The routine abuse and neglect of children, and the everyday abuse and discrimination against women.

14. Do you have an ideal?

Ideals are what make us human, make life worth living. Mine boils down to this: finding practical ways to work on the future through the children of today. Is it possible to preserve the goodness and genius with which each and every child is born, so that each generation may treat the next a little better and the world may become that much safer for the endangered human species? I believe it's "do-able"!