Out of the limo, into the slums of Latin America for philanthropist Philippe Houdard

By David Adams, Times Latin America Correspondent

MIAMI BEACH –

In May 2006 **Philippe Houdard** gave a eulogy that changed his life.

As he praised his late grandfather, a Louisiana family doctor noted for his caring and philanthropy, Houdard thought of his own career selling software.

Houdard's job had flown him all over Latin America. From the comfort of luxury hotels and chauffeur-driven limos, he had observed a very different world.

"It compelled me to take account of his life, my life, what I wanted it all to be about," he said. "I had been thinking about it forever. Now was the time to do it."

Above: Nearly 200,000 people live in Rio de Janeiro's Rocinha, the largest slum in Latin America. It's infested with drug gangs that often employ children. Houdard's first project was an after-school computer training program for 100 slum children in Rio de Janeiro. Below: Houdard with children attending schools founded by Developing Minds Foundation, which has sparked their interest in reading and technology.

After the funeral, Houdard quit his job, giving up a six-figure salary and expense account, and threw himself at a new goal: trying to pull children out of the intractable poverty that fuels violence and warfare throughout the region.

Houdard, 39, wasn't satisfied with looking for a job with an existing charity. Rather, he decided to start his own: the **Developing Minds Foundation**.

Though he has not altogether forsaken the corporate boardroom, these days he spends his time exploring some of Latin America's most squalid slums and remote, poverty-stricken mountainsides. He provides computer training in Brazil's largest *favela* and rehabilitation to former child soldiers in Colombia.

When he started, he figured a year would be enough to get set up. Then he'd resume his business career.

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Lingering trauma

Houdard spends his days working out of a Spartan one-room office in a bank tower in South Beach.

On the wall a faded black-and-white photo from the 1950s shows his father in military uniform on the front lines of the French-Algerian war. Houdard says his father never recovered from the psychological scars of that brutal conflict.

"He was just tormented for the rest of his life," he said. In those days war veterans got no help dealing with trauma, Houdard notes. "Now we know a lot more about human psychology and what the experience means."

He thinks about the photo when he works with teenage boys in Colombia who spent years in the jungle fighting against their will for leftist guerrillas.

"When I see these kids in Colombia, a lot of times I look at their faces and think about what my father's face would have looked like when he came back," he said. "If we can get them to go on the other path, to where they can have a better life, where they can rehabilitate, that's one of my great motivations."

After the war, Houdard's father was sent to the United States to study modern farming in the South. There he met Houdard's mother, who came from a prominent family of Louisiana doctors. They eloped and went back to the Houdard family farm in northern France.

Houdard's father never overcame his wartime trauma and the marriage eventually ended. Houdard's mother moved back to the States when Philippe was 7, and settled in Daytona Beach.

Houdard went to the University of Florida. After working on Capitol Hill, he got a master's degree from Harvard Business School.

He quickly found a job in the booming technology sector, marketing software for call centers. For the next 10 years he dedicated himself to advancing his career, rising to be executive vice president for sales and marketing at a health care company.

When he quit to start Developing Minds, he took his business acumen with him.

"What's remarkable about Philippe is he puts action behind his ideas. He walks the talk," said his mother, Suzanne Amsel, a vocational specialist for disabled students in Daytona Beach.

"How many of us think how we would like to do something for other people but we don't get off

our couch, let alone put ourselves in harm's way."

Houdard's first project was an after-school computer training program for 100 slum children in Rio de Janeiro.

For funding, he avoided major international donors. Instead, he asked friends and ex-colleagues.

"I went back and hit up every one of my friends in my entire network from working in corporate life. Virtually every company that I have worked for, every boss and many of my colleagues have contributed," he said.

"It's an Obama-style approach where you'd be surprised by the number of contributions we get that are $50," he said.

Donations have ranged from a supporter who gave $25,000 to an anonymous envelope with $8. In lieu of wedding gifts, one Colombian-Brazilian couple in Miami requested that guests send donations to Houdard.

His grass roots efforts have raised about $125,000.

But at the end of the first year, Houdard realized he wasn't ready to return to the corporate world.

"I just fell in love with the project," he said. "I want to make this a lifelong effort."

Another sweet kid

Fundraising in Miami is different from other places. One evening recently, Houdard found himself by the side of the runway as leggy models paraded the bikini designs of one of his donors. Proceeds from sales went to Developing Minds.

"He goes to places that personally, me as a Brazilian, I would not go," said swimwear designer Mirla Sabino, 37, who hosted the event at the trendy Raleigh Hotel. "I bring beauty into the world dressing women for the beach, but it's good to know I can also help in another way."

A couple of days later, Houdard arrived at the nondescript offices of Neutralogistics. a Miami freight consolidation firm run by one of his former colleagues. Houdard was wearing jeans and a loose shirt, sleeves rolled up, and carrying a bottle of Diet Coke. He had no PowerPoint presentation, just a compelling story.

"I was in Colombia three weeks ago on a retreat with 25 child soldiers," he tells two company

executives and a third donor visiting from Tampa.

He tells the story of one boy recruited by left wing guerrillas at age 12 and forced to endure 100-mile marches carrying an AK-47.

"He told me he had never been to school at all," he said. The boy escaped and is now enrolled in one of Houdard's projects in the city of Medellin.

"The really amazing part of this is he's learning woodwork. He'll be able to get a job and make his way back into society. For all the horrors he's been through, he's still a sweet kid, but with very conflicted emotions."

Neutralogistics president Alex Tellez promised to find space for some secondhand computers in his company's weekly delivery to Colombia.

"He's like an investment banker, using education as an investment tool," Tellez says.

Except that he's not an investment banker. Houdard hasn't taken a salary since he started Developing Minds. He's living off savings. And that can't last forever.

He says he is exploring offers to go back into the corporate world and is doing some work for a boutique investment bank. He hopes to find a way that will allow him to dedicate the time he needs for Developing Minds.

"My idea was to take a sabbatical for one year to start something that I would continue to be able to manage forever," he said. "It's taken a bit longer than I thought, but I'm sure that's what will happen."

For now he is focused on his next project: promoting literacy in a violence-torn province of northern Colombia.

"I met this child soldier from Uraba. He's a very sweet kid, and he had it really, really rough. That got me interested."

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