Village daddy

Siddhartha Kaul, recently elected global president of SOS Children’s Villages International, talks to Veenu Sandhu on what drives the organisation

Veenu Sandhu / New Delhi Jul 28, 2012, 00:03 IST

It was the mid-1970s. Siddhartha Kaul, about 20 then, was reading in his room when around midnight his mother knocked on his door to say that someone was rattling the gate outside. Kaul was used to strangers approaching what had by then been his home for five years — the country’s first SOS children’s village, Greenfields, in Faridabad near Delhi. His father, J N Kaul, had helped set up the village and the family lived there with dozens of orphaned, destitute and abandoned children.

At the gate that night was an elderly man with a woman who had a bundle in her arms. It turned out to be a newborn girl, “maybe not even an hour old,” says Kaul. She hadn’t even been bathed yet. “That,” he adds, “was the first child I ever received.” Nearly four decades later, Kaul, now 57, is responsible for 518 SOS villages that are home to 62,702 children across 133 countries. As the first non-European to be recently elected global president of the Austria-headquartered SOS Children’s Villages International, Kaul knows he has a huge responsibility. He also has huge role models: Hermann Gmeiner and his father who was “papaji” to the SOS children. Sitting in his office in SOS Enclave in Faridabad, which is not far from Greenfields children’s village, Kaul speaks of Gmeiner, the man who started it all with “600 Austrian shillings in his pocket and an idea in his head”. That was back in 1949 when World War II had left hundreds of children without mothers and hundreds of mothers without children. Gmeiner decided to bring the two together and the first SOS village was born.

At the sprawling SOS Enclave, there are five homes. Kaul walks into one. It’s a neat little place with a living room, dining room, bedrooms and kitchen. Inside are seven children, aged between three and ten, and a woman who greets him with a smile. She goes into the kitchen to get cold drinks for everybody, while Kaul strikes up a conversation with the children. It’s hard to believe that the neatly-dressed children are not
siblings and have found this home only a few months ago. And that the woman is not that biological mother, though they call her so.

SOS Villages is a mammoth organisation and it requires sizeable funds. “Of the 133 countries, only 18 raise the money for all this work,” says Kaul who has a four-year tenure as president. Germany contributes the most followed by Austria, Norway and France. “India has now started to raise some money,” he says. The villages are mainly financed by individuals and one-off donations, though governments also help out.

Kaul says as president his main focus will be on settling young adults or else SOS Villages’ entire effort will go waste. Kaul should know — that first baby he received is now a senior executive with a company and lives happily with her family.