

# Business Students Practice a New Bottom Line

BY HEATHER MILLER

"At La Sierra University, our goal is not only to teach students how to maximize profits," says Johnny Thomas, assistant professor of economics and finance, "but also to make them discover the meaning of 'profit maximization' from a personal and humanistic perspective." That's where Students in Free Enterprise comes in.

Started in 1975 by Sam Walton, Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) is an international non-profit organization that educates college and university students about the free enterprise system through hands-on, practical experience.

The La Sierra University SIFE team, organized in the fall of 1991 through the university's School of Business and Management, has won two SIFE International Exposition Championships, in 1994 and in 1995. In 1995, the students brought back six trophies and \$7,500 for their championship and wins in four special competitions.

"What caught the attention of the judges at the competition," says Thomas, "was the idea of service. Everyone else had great business ideas. So did we. But what was different about La Sierra University was the fact that so many of our projects were based on serving our community."

## What SIFE Does

"In the free-enterprise system, the purpose of government is to maximize the individual's freedom to pursue his or her own self-interest," Thomas explains. The problem arises when, in their passion for acquiring capital, businesses fail to take into consideration "the human factor" as Thomas puts it. "When this happens," he says, "the economically disadvantaged may be left to fend for themselves on an uneven playing field." When the role of the state becomes more limited, as is currently the trend in a number of countries, this creates a vacuum that voluntary organizations—such as charities, service clubs, or organizations like SIFE—need to fill.

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From the very beginning, the La Sierra SIFE club wanted to find a way to spread the message of free enterprise and give the economically disadvantaged the opportunity to survive in a competitive environment. "Our goal was to teach people how to fish, rather than to give them fish," Thomas says.

goals through 122 business projects. This year's projects build on previous successes but take the ideas a step further: more education, more targeted markets, and the addition of professional consultants.

*Find a Dollar in the Debt*—In an effort to make the community aware of

the 1995-1996 SIFE directors decided to sponsor another debt-awareness event. But this time, instead of using sand, they used balloons—5,000 of them—each one representing \$1 billion, to represent a \$5 trillion debt. "It's hard enough to understand what one billion is, let alone one trillion!" Wise says.

The SIFE team invited 500 local students to the event to launch 10 balloons each. Classroom discussions helped the children understand the issues.

*SIFE Virtual Reality*—The La Sierra University SIFE team created SIFE Virtual Reality as an educational tool to bring to life places, situations, and issues of global significance. SIFE students created software to help students at a local intermediate school get acquainted with the new technology before their school had access to the World Wide Web. The LSU team was the first SIFE entity to use this tool for one of their projects.

*Campus Cleaners*—SIFE students manage the Campus Cleaners, a local dry-cleaning business. In its third year of operation, the cleaners employs eight students, providing them with valuable entrepreneurial skills in the areas of customer service, accounting, advertising, and employee relations. Sales exceeded \$100,000 for the 1994 fiscal year.

*Rent-a-Brain*—In its fifth year, Rent-a-Brain provides a variety of consulting services to local businesses. Under the guidance of faculty, SIFE students analyze current economic and political trends, consumer needs, advertising strategies, tax planning, and employment management.

*Homeless Shelter Employment Weekly Seminars*—SIFE students have presented ongoing seminars at a local homeless shelter on job-search techniques, drafting résumés, interviewing skills, and dressing for success. Approximately 50 individuals from the shelter completed the eight seminar sessions, and more than 20 résumés were created. The hands-on seminars motivated many shelter residents to change their attitude and outlook on life and the future. Two attendees have enrolled in the local community college.



The La Sierra University SIFE Presentation Team won the International Championship trophy in 1995 for the second year in a row for their free-enterprise projects in the local community.

With this idea in mind, the La Sierra SIFE team began creating projects to meet their objectives. SIFE offered a natural way for their Christian beliefs to flourish in a business setting.

"Our emphasis this year is educating in schools," says Patria Wise, sophomore accounting major and LSU SIFE director. "We want to improve [children's] standard of living, particularly among the economically disadvantaged," she says.

#### SIFE Projects

Last year, the club pursued their

the vastness of the U.S. national debt, the SIFE team created a giant sand-pile in February 1995, containing an estimated 4.5 trillion grains of sand to represent the \$4.5 trillion national debt. SIFE students buried imitation coins in the sand and invited the public to dig for the coins to win dozens of prizes, including a trip to Hawaii. Former Congressman Bill Dannemeyer of Fullerton, California, who served as a member of the House Budget Committee, spoke about the national debt.

*Blow Away the Debt*—Following the success of Find a Dollar in the Debt,

*Stats for Kids*—A program in local elementary and junior high schools, Stats for Kids teaches youngsters how to read surveys and understand today's economics.

*Touch the World, Teach a Child*—Last year, SIFE members developed a partnership with a local elementary school, where La Sierra University students tutored elementary pupils in reading and math.

*Adult Literacy*—SIFE members conducted weekly one-on-one reading sessions with adults this past year to help reduce the growing rate of adult illiteracy. Nearly 30 adults have benefited from this program.

*Eradicating Illiteracy in Riverside*—Based on a proposal by LSU School of Education teacher Betty McCune, Eradicating Illiteracy in Riverside is a natural outgrowth of SIFE's previous tutoring programs. The framework is being developed and implemented by McCune and Mel Campbell, another School of Education professor. This will ensure that SIFE literacy programs maintain a high level of professionalism. Other SIFE projects are also advancing with the help of LSU faculty consultants.

*Headstart "Adopt-a-Child" Christ-*

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*mas Party*—This continuing project has provided rich rewards for both SIFE members and participating children. Last year, 300 La Sierra University students "adopted" 250 economically disadvantaged children for a day of fun, food, and festivities. Each child received five SIFE dollars to use toward the "purchase" of his or her meal. More money could be "earned" by winning games at the carnival. Children received a prize for every dollar they "deposited" into the SIFE Savings Bank, teaching them the benefits of saving and deferred gratification.

*Headstart Parents Program*—With 10 items on their agenda, the LSU SIFE team is taking their Headstart program to the next level by targeting participating parents in key areas such as financial management.

*Strive-On*—Recognizing the importance of minority role models in children's development, SIFE organized dramatic productions for 80 fifth graders at a local intermediate school. The participating SIFE members represented diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds who creatively demonstrated the importance of education in a free-market society.

### **Why Adventist Education Can Make a Difference**

"With projects like Rent-a-Brain," says Steve Taggart, a senior marketing major and captain of the SIFE presentation team, "we draw on our marketing and finance classes. We apply things like how to prepare a proposal. It helps local businesses. They get quality consulting at a reasonable price," he adds.

"Through their involvement in SIFE, students learn to bridge the gap between academic jargon and business practice," Thomas says. "The more we get students involved in building these bridges, the better these students become."

Commitment to service is an important component of the SIFE program. After spending a year as a student missionary, several students such as April Atkin, a sophomore pre-physical therapy major, and David Kasischke, a se-



La Sierra University students tutor pupils in math and reading at a local elementary school as part of the "Touch the World, Teach a Child" program created by the LSU SIFE club.



nior business administration major, have joined SIFE to give something back to society.

The entire La Sierra University SIFE team has adopted this philosophy and seeks to develop in its members a basic tenet of Adventist education: the moral and social values of serving others.

"As Christians, you've got to learn how to give back to your community," says Thomas. "Try to make a difference in your community and feel the joy and pain of helping people find opportunities amid scarce resources. Instill in students the need to understand the limits of profit maximization and

World Services and the Hancock Center for Youth Ministry, and others," he says.

While the La Sierra SIFE team has achieved significant external recognition for themselves and the university by winning the International Competition in 1994 and 1995, "even more important," says Lawrence Geraty, La Sierra University president, "are the effects that the SIFE team has had on the university and its community. The whole campus has shared in the success of the individual projects and basked in the team's international attainment. Both have brought the university im-

portant recognition in the print and electronic media," Geraty says.

Thomas concludes, "The key to a free market is to give everyone the opportunity to compete. Promote merit as a yardstick, challenge students to be the best they can be, and develop in them a mindset that attending an Adventist college will provide them with an education that is among the best in the nation."

#### How Your Campus Can Get Involved

This year, SIFE involves some 460 colleges and universities in the U.S. and abroad. While the majority of SIFE chapters are in the U.S., there are also chapters in Mexico, Canada, Poland, Hong Kong, and Australia. There is also a new focus on Eastern Europe, where several teams have sister campuses in other countries.

Although a college or university must be invited to join Students In Free Enterprise, the opportunities to participate in free enterprise and community activities are up to the individual campuses. ☛

For more information about joining SIFE, call SIFE National Headquarters at (417) 831-9505.

*Heather Miller is Public Relations Director at La Sierra University, Riverside, California.*



Some 300 La Sierra University students hosted 250 children from a local Headstart program for the annual SIFE Christmas party in 1994. University students purchased gifts for the children they had "adopted" for the day, and enjoyed a meal, festivities, and of course a visit from Santa.

the joy of making a difference in their local community. If we can build in this philosophy at the young age of 18 to 24, then we have produced citizens capable of making a difference in our communities," he says.

"That is the reason why I teach here," Thomas says. "I constantly get CEOs inviting me to join their team. My answer has always been, 'Someone's got to show these students that there is more to life than maximizing profits.'"

But Thomas emphasizes that SIFE is only one of many groups on campus that are teaching these values through service to the community. "I encourage my SIFE students to join the Korean Club, the Student Association, to get involved with the Stahl Center for



Johnny Thomas, assistant professor of economics and SIFE faculty sponsor, examines prize-winning "coins" found by those participating in "Find a Dollar in the Debt," a February 1995 event in which SIFE members hid coins in 4.5 trillion grains of sand to help the community grasp the enormity of the U.S. national debt.