



## Graham brings hope, mission to Hooper Bay

Samaritan's Purse president Franklin Graham has brought hope to kids in Hooper Bay. (Phil Walczak/KTUU-TV)

by Rhonda McBride  
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**Hooper Bay, Alaska** - He's the son of Evangelist Billy Graham and head of the Christian relief group Samaritan's Purse. Franklin Graham also has a cabin at Lake Clark, but for the most part he tries to keep a low profile in Alaska. A fire in Hooper Bay last August changed everything though.

He seems like a typical Bush pilot comfortable at the controls. Maybe it's because Franklin Graham flies all over the world on relief missions. He's a high-flying evangelist with a down-to-earth approach. The last time Graham was in Hooper Bay, a fire had just ripped through the heart of the village, but it has come full circle in just three short months.

Whatever hat he wears, Graham tries to bring hope. But hope was hard to find here.

For Martha Simon's family of nine, the fire meant being split up among several households. As Simon moved into her new home, a part of her wonders if the nightmare is finally over.

"It's too good to be true. It's like a magical wonderland or something," she said.

The kids can't believe it either. Their new house is filled with new furniture and new belongings, bought with donations from strangers. There are even handmade quilts.

One American Red Cross worker went to Hooper Bay to assess the damage. She had never heard of Graham and was skeptical about his promises to build homes and replace snowmachines.

"I just kind of teased him and said, 'I'm writing all this down Mr. Franklin Graham,'" said Kelly Hurd, who is the communications manager for the American Red Cross of Alaska.

But the promises have been fulfilled and Graham even brought a holiday ham. And so has the idea that out of one gift of love come offspring that go forth and multiply. In his seven years as pastor of the Covenant Church in Hooper Bay, it's been Grant Funk's dream to bring a teen center to the village.

Now Graham says Samaritan's Purse will return next summer to build it.

"When we came, we realized your community needed help," Graham said.

Ask people about the number of teen suicides in Hooper Bay and they'll tell you they have lost count. One estimate is about 20 over the last 10 years.

Although the service was meant to celebrate the village's comeback from the fire, that joy faded for one family. The family has a new home, but now a loss they can't replace: a son who committed suicide while in jail.

"Hooper Bay is not a place we're gonna forget. Every one of my volunteers, when they came back, said these kids need help," Franklin said.

Dennis Lake is a preacher, but before he found God, he was a bootlegger. As someone who lost a daughter to suicide, he knows why some of these kids are in no hurry to go home and he worries about what they will find here.

"Especially these kids being out so late; marijuana is available. Drinking is available," Lake said.

Just like this intersection, Hooper Bay is at a crossroads. A brand-new school will soon open and right across the street, the village of Hooper Bay has given the Covenant Church land for the youth center. It will be a place where kids can find refuge if they need it.

"How does a kid get out of here if he's being molested or whatever? How do you escape from it? That's why you see the suicide rate in rural Alaska," Graham said.

Beyond the teen center, Samaritan's Purse hopes to do more for Hooper Bay and that other churches will do their part in other villages.

"People use the bathroom in a bucket with a plastic bag and they take it to a land fill and dump it. This is what you'd expect to find in the middle of some country in Africa. This is our home," Graham said.

Hooper Bay is a home that, despite its struggles, has a lot to offer.

"The world needs what rural Alaska has. There's a lot of values here that are really special. Materialism is rampant in the world. Ten years down the road, I see Hooper Bayer's being world leaders, not just community leaders. The pain that suicide produces: if that can heal, then we have a world waiting for healing," Graham said.

For now the healing has begun on this hillside once ravaged by fire.

"This is hope. OK. We want to call this Mount Hope," Graham said.

Mission Aviation provides air support for Samaritan's Purse. It's based in Kenai and logged more than 250 hours of flight time in the Hooper Bay relief effort.