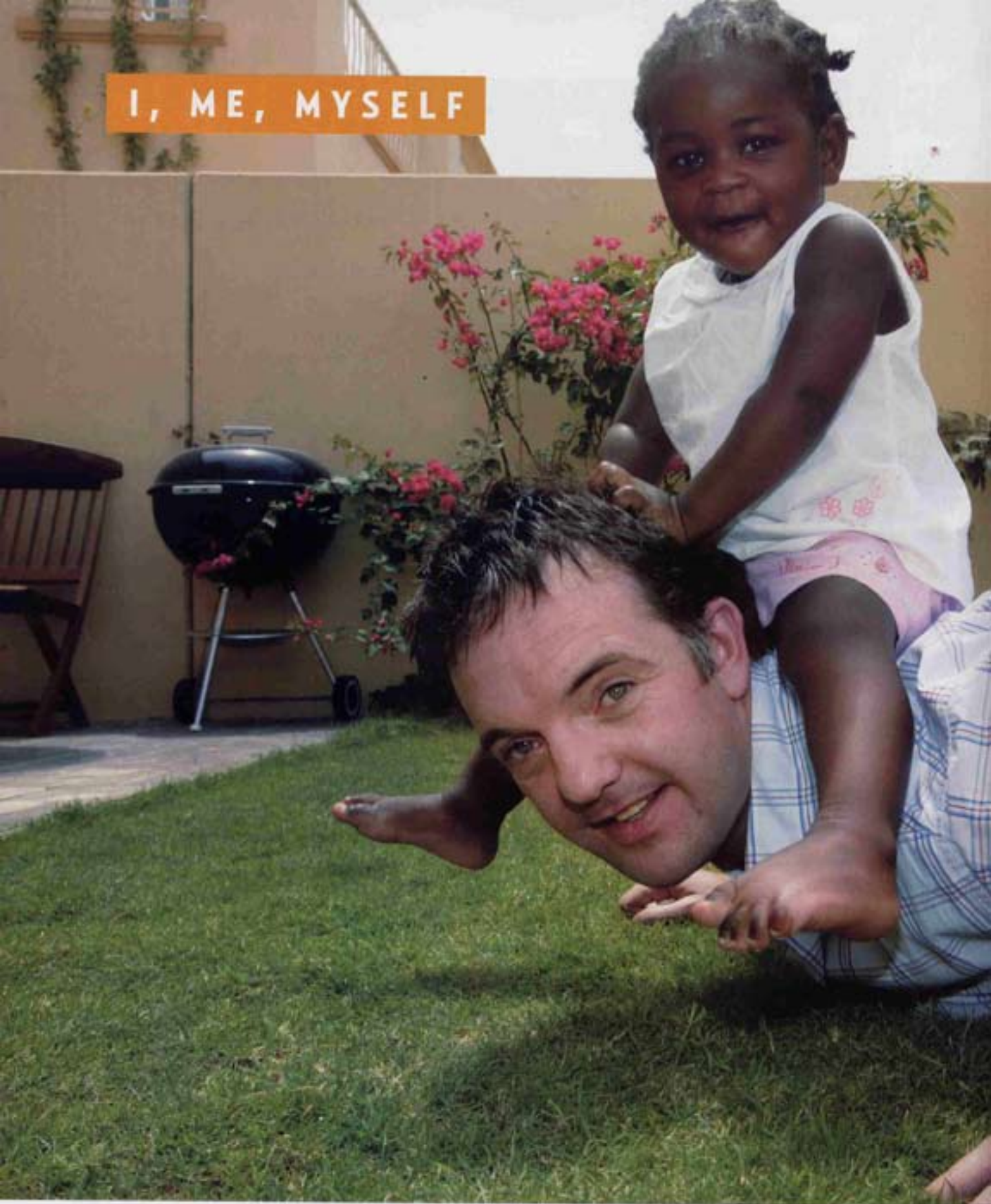


I, ME, MYSELF



Not a hero ...



Bouncing with joy...

Matthew Morgan with his children Dauda, 3, and Magda, 2, who he adopted from an orphanage in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

M

ATTHEW MORGAN-JONES IS A FATHER WITH A difference. The 34-year-old has single-handedly adopted two toddlers from war-torn Sierra Leone and has also set up a UAE charity to help an orphanage there. He tells **Lorraine Chandler** why these days he's more interested in potties than Porsches.

Photos by **Rangarajan**

just a dad

Two years ago, Matthew Morgan-Jones was a young single guy in Dubai, enjoying a fun lifestyle and the perks of his training career in The Body Shop and later in Home Centre. Now he is a father of two children he adopted from Sierra Leone (and is in the process of adopting a third).

He has also just set up a charity to help the All As One Children's Centre in Sierra Leone, a country that only recently emerged from a bloody civil war that spanned more than a decade.

There's no denying his two children - Dauda, 3, and Magda, 2 - have been spared a tough existence in what the UN has called the world's poorest country. Yet Morgan-Jones, from England, is at pains to point out he didn't adopt them out of altruism, but because he wanted to have children.



"My behaviour is a lot more positive nowadays because there are always little eyes and ears following me," says Matthew Morgan.

"It's a win-win situation for all of us," he says, keen to avoid being pigeon-holed as a do-gooder.

Even as a young man, his paternal instincts were very strong. However, he was devastated in his mid-twenties when he learned that he would never be able to father children biologically.

"It was then that I realised how much I really wanted a family. I started to think about adoption because I knew there were so many children who needed a family, and the equation seemed to add up," he says. "I always thought I'd get married first but that didn't seem to happen."

After completing a BA in administration management at the University of Humber in 1994, he started working for The Body Shop

in London in the business development and training department.

After a two-year stint in Australia, he moved to Dubai in 2001 as the company's retail zone manager for Middle East and Africa. He helped set up the Body Shop franchise in South Africa, where the company sponsored two Aids orphanages. Morgan-Jones was responsible for liaising with the orphanages and it was then that he decided he would like to adopt children from Africa.

He began seeking more information on how to go about it and, sometime in November 2003, came across an article in a magazine that had details about the Dubai Adoption Support Group. He realised he could start the adoption ball rolling from Dubai.

Morgan-Jones did not waste time and soon started undergoing the rigorous clearance process to become an adoptive dad. As a single male, it wasn't easy since most countries had very strict adoption regulations.

While psychologists and the police were vetting him, he did his research on adoption and learned that adopting a child from Sierra Leone might be a good option. He heard about All As One, a children's centre run by American Deanna Wallace in the country's capital, Freetown. The centre, which has a staff of 30, houses around 70 children. It also runs education, health and community programmes.

The number of orphaned children in Sierra Leone is staggering. There are an estimated 3,000 children waiting to be

adopted in the capital alone. The problem is compounded by the fact that adoption procedures in the country are extremely stringent.

Morgan-Jones had expressed interest in adopting two children under the age of 5 - a very brave move, indeed, and fortunately for him, his request to adopt was approved by All As One in May 2004. But that was only the first step in a long journey. He received referral papers for Dauda, then aged 18 months, and shortly after, for Magda, then barely a couple of months old. But in July 2004 he received disturbing news - the chief justice of Sierra Leone had suspended international adoptions.

Morgan-Jones had already gone shopping for baby clothes and started decorating the kids' room. "I'd done all the things they told me not to do until I had the children," he says, ruefully.

He had to wait for close to six months before Sierra Leone, in January 2005, reopened international adoptions. Never one to give up, he continued pursuing his case and after four excruciating months, his case was heard. By July, Morgan-Jones had miraculously gained custody of both children and was able to fly back to Dubai. Now he is in the process of adopting a third child, David, who was Dauda's best friend at the orphanage.

All the months he spent in Sierra Leone gave Morgan-Jones a new perspective about children and adoption. He felt compelled to do something for the children there. Shortly after returning to Dubai, he heard from Wallace that the centre was in dire financial straits and might have to close within months if it didn't receive more funds. He sprang into action, organising a charity dinner in December that raised \$15,000 (Dh55,170) and enabled the orphanage to fund itself for another two months. In the meantime, he contacted the Dubai Aid and Humanitarian City to consider steps for setting up an organisation in the UAE to support the centre. He was fortunate yet again. The charity, also called All As One, was recently approved and Morgan-Jones, the UAE director and chief volunteer (as he quips) is full of enthusiasm about spreading the message around the country, after yet another successful charity dinner in March.

He tells me that he's looking for volunteers from different fields, including journalism - he says this in a very pointed way - and I ask myself if this tremendously passionate man will end up persuading me to be more than just a volunteer of his charity organisation.