

Soles for Kids Is Good For The Soul

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Some say that travel is good for the soul. Rich Rosenberg may or may not agree; however, two African vacations about five years ago resulted in another sole in the form of shoes for kids in Africa. During their first vacation there, he and wife Barbara stopped at some cultural spots and also a rural school in Namibia where he asked the headmaster how he could help his students.

Typewriters was one idea, but shoes turned out to be a better choice because students saved their one pair of shoes for church and went to school barefoot. Going barefoot in Africa can easily lead to infection because the dirt roads and paths are often rich in animal excrement.

The headmaster specified that the shoes be used, not new, because shipping new shoes would mean paying customs and other taxes. That first year, the Rosenbergs gathered and shipped 500 pairs of gently-used shoes to Namibia and Botswana. Sadly, not all of them were received because along the way many were pilfered. Though the Rosenbergs contacted the U.S. embassy, the U.N., and an Illinois senator, they received no help with this problem.

They had to rethink their tactics, and on a second trip to Africa, this time to Tanzania, they stopped at many schools and found one, the O'Brien School for Maasai, which was receiving used U.S. school equipment from a foundation in Hinsdale! Though they had to give up sending shoes to Namibia and Botswana, with the help of the Hinsdale foundation they could tuck shoes into the nooks and crannies of the huge crates of school desks, etc at no charge and be assured that the shoes would reach their destination. Over time they worked out a system of providing colored bags with each color representing one of the four or five different schools and two or three orphanages where they would eventually be sent.

The Rosenbergs with help from daughter Heather Stalker and her husband Brian accept shoes year round at their store, Elmhurst Photo Boutique, 535 Spring Road. With the help of family and friends, they sort the shoes for shipment in the spring and fall. Shoes that are too worn go to other charities, but all of them stay out of landfills.

They soon noticed that among the donations were shoes not appropriate for Africa such as boots and heavy winter shoes. Another vacation and side trip solved this problem. This time it was a trip to the Badlands with a side trip to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. It is the poorest area in the U.S. with poor soil for agriculture, an unemployment level of 60%, and a high level of alcoholism.

The Rosenbergs met with Mary Weaselbear and the granddaughter of Indian activist Russell Means about shipping shoes there. The first shipment arrived just before a severe snowstorm,

and the second in the middle of a storm. They are stored in a local church used as a “shoe warehouse,” and those in need can go home with warm feet. What used to be called Soles for Africa is now called Soles for Kids and to date, more than 12,000 pairs of shoes with a market value of \$150,000 have been delivered to needy children free of charge. They are collected and shipped not only to Africa and Pine Ridge, but also to other areas in need such as Haiti.

Their main shoe drive is in the spring when they partner with the Kiwanis Key Club at York H.S. with a goal of collecting 2600 pairs of shoes, the population of York. Dropoff buckets are placed at every Elmhurst school, and the Key Club monitors them and delivers them to Elmhurst Photo Boutique for sorting. In addition to shoes, solesforkids.org has started collecting such items as used tennis balls from the Courts and partners with Eagle Scouts to collect used AYSO soccer uniforms and soccer balls. They also partner with many churches in town. One in particular is taking a group to Pine Ridge in August, so will deliver a shipment of shoes.

For more information, visit solesforafrica.org or solesforkids.org. Elmhurst Photo Boutique can be reached at 630-834-4000.