

Elmhurst Nonprofit Collects Shoes for Children in Africa

TribLocal

Posted November 30, 2010

Elmhurst, IL — Imagine walking out the door and not having a pair of shoes to wear. Treading over rough roads, stones, thorns or even broken glass to get to school. That's what Rich Rosenberg observed two years ago when he visited a school in Tanzania and noticed that half the students were not wearing shoes.

Rosenberg was on a safari in Africa when he took a side trip to a rural school and had a conversation with school leaders about their students' needs.

"I was talking to the headmaster and I said 'I want to know what we could most do to help the school,'" Rosenberg said. "What could we do to change lives?"

There were plenty of needs, but the answer came down to shoes, an idea that Rosenberg seized because he realized they would be relatively easy to collect, ship and distribute. Armed with that information, Rosenberg, founder of Elmhurst Camera in Elmhurst, returned to the U.S. and started Soles for Africa, a non-profit organization that collects new and gently used shoes for children in rural Africa.

Over the past two years, the non-profit organization has sent more than 2,400 pairs to Tanzania, Botswana, Namibia and other African countries.

"Many of these children walk four and five kilometers to school," Rosenberg said. "There are thorns and rocks that can injure their feet. If they injure their feet they can't go to school. Or they can get diseases or cuts can become infected."

For help collecting children's shoes, Rosenberg has turned to the members of the York High School Key Club, which is an affiliate of the Kiwanis Club.

The club is currently sponsoring its annual "Soles for Africa" shoe drive. It is accepting donations of summer shoes such as sandals, flip flops, flats and gym shoes through Dec. 10. No winter boots are being accepted.

New or gently used shoes may be dropped off at any of the following locations: Bryan and Churchville Middle Schools; Emerson, Jackson and Lincoln Elementary Schools; York High School and the Elmhurst YMCA.

Rosenberg said calling upon students to collect shoes for other children seemed like a good idea.

"I call it kids helping kids," he said.

Although he has worked with other non-profits previously, Rosenberg currently is getting help shipping and distributing the shoes from Kellie O'Brien, a Hinsdale resident who founded O'Brien School for the Massai, a school in Tanzania that serves children in preschool through fourth grade.

About 600 pairs of shoes collected by students in Elmhurst were part of a shipment sent recently to the O'Brien School for the Massai. The shipment, which is expected to arrive in

Africa in January, also includes desks, school supplies and other items that O'Brien collected from local schools and churches.

O'Brien said she is touched by Rosenberg's desire to give back.

"I am so impressed with someone's who's been successful in life who's taking this time in his life to give back," she said. "It's not like he has any more free time than anyone else, but he has made a commitment to make this (giving back) part of his life."

Rosenberg also started Special Kids Day, a non-profit organization that provides parties and celebrations for kids with special needs. The organization will hold a holiday party from 3:30 to 8 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 1 at Wilder Mansion, 225 Prospect Ave.

Rosenberg said he wants to be in Tanzania when the shipment is unloaded and snap a documentary-style photo essay to show children wearing the shoes, and what they do in their daily lives as they wear them.

He said donating new or gently used shoes can change the lives of children, and have a positive impact on the environment.

"Instead of putting your shoes in a landfill you can put them on another child's feet – a child who could not otherwise afford them."

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