

Hope recycled

Local group gathers Stuff for the Poor *...reaches one-year milestone*

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Last year, a group of local people decided to do something to make a difference in the lives of their neighbors and those fighting poverty around the world.

The brainchild of Rwandan refugee Providence Rubingisa, Stuff for the Poor was born when Rubingisa teamed up with Wilmington resident Christina Dyer.

Since then, the group has collected over 20,000 pounds of apparel items including 10,348 pairs of shoes.

The aim of Stuff for the Poor is to use unwanted American goods to lift the world's citizens out of poverty.

On Tuesday, Jan. 8, "Stuff" shipped its very first container full of shoes and clothing to Tanzania in Africa.

Instead of handing out clothes and shoes to the poor, Stuff sells containers of goods to African brokers who sell the goods at discounted rates. The funds gathered from the sale of the containers are then used to fund community development projects in the Third World.

Each pair of shoes represents one step toward clean water wells, malaria prevention programs, agricultural education efforts and HIV/AIDS awareness in Africa.

The past year has been a whirlwind of excitement for the grassroots charity, which has seen an enormous response from the local community.

Donations from those living in the Wilmington, Braidwood and Coal City communities have helped the organization make progress in the ultimate goal of stopping poverty while lessening the impact on American landfills. Contributions from area residents have included cash donations, volunteer efforts and the donation of shoes and clothing.

The Wilmington football team dedicated one Saturday morning to Stuff's efforts. When Coach Jeff Reents learned of the group's sorting event at a gym donated by the St. Rose School in

Wilmington, Reents and his team helped to sort through thousands of clothing items, and helped the goods onto trucks.

Immaculate Conception Church in Braidwood also lent a hand to help the group. Last year, the church held a shoe-drive and parishioners of the church are now sponsoring eight African families.

The owners of Hometown Storage made the collection efforts possible by donating storage space for a whole year, helping Stuff collect items each week at its Diamond location.

From sponsoring a family to giving a pair of shoes, it seems that area residents have gone above and beyond to rally around the cause of those living thousands of miles away.

Over the summer, the Braidwood Lion's Club donated space at Summerfest so that Stuff could set up a tent for shoe collection and public relations.

The space helped the group gain exposure in Braidwood and led to many helpful donations.

Rubingisa is grateful for the local contributions, recognizing the significance for Stuff for the Poor. "A non-profit organization cannot survive without people embracing it. For any cause in this world, without people embracing the cause, the cause will die."

The cause has not died in the local community. With the first shipment on its way to Tanzania, Stuff is asking area residents to continue donating used clothing and shoes. The group's goal is to send one container to Africa each month.

Donations continue to roll in and Rubingisa says the group's success is a sign from God. "It's exciting and it's a sign that God is working. He made this happen and that is a sign that the vision is right and people are behind it."

Rubingisa's partner, Christina Dyer, is thankful that the local community has embraced Stuff. Dyer says the group needs even more support locally and would like to see partnerships formed with area organizations. "I've been overwhelmed by the positive response from people in the local community. I would like to see our area and all of Will/Grundy counties do more and partner with our organization through various churches and high schools."

Dyer says working with Stuff for the Poor is as beneficial to the volunteers as it is for those receiving aid.

"Because I was a therapist for so long, so many people were always searching for meaning in their lives and always felt kind of empty. My theory is that when people get like that, they need to step outside their own selves and help someone less fortunate because it reminds you what you do have. Our motto reads: Let us inspire you to change your own life by saving another's."

Rubingisa agrees with Dyer's sentiment that giving helps the giver. "It's just encouraging. It's good for the organization and it's good for the people in the Wilmington area."

Dyer believes that Rubingisa's presence in the local area has enriched the lives of those

involved with Stuff for the Poor. "Providence brings in diversity. Providence's experience and the whole idea of trying to help the continent of Africa brings in a whole, new, rich experience for people."

Dyer believes the organization helps volunteers and recipients to learn their differences are not so big after all. "We're all the same, deep down inside. The world is becoming very small. We are more alike than we are different. We can capitalize on those things alike and not focus so much on whether we're helping Americans or not. We're helping our brothers and sisters around the world."

With the first container making it's way across the ocean, the group is gearing up for the next big collection drive.

Since many people receive new clothes and shoes for Christmas, Stuff for the Poor is asking area residents to clean out their closets for the common good.

The experience of donating shoes, time or money for the poor, Dyer says, is both enriching and life changing. "I never in a million years thought I'd be going off to Africa or traveling to parts of the world. After seeing the kindness and generosity of spirit [of those] who are poverty stricken, it lifts my soul. It makes me feel better about the world."

After her travels around the world and her connection with those struggling with poverty, Dyer hopes area residents will learn what she's come to understand about the cultures of the world. "They have beautiful, rich cultures. They're different but that doesn't mean they're worse. I learn more about myself dealing with these people than I do when I'm with everyone who thinks like me. That's the best thing I can teach my children - to see beyond their own world."

To learn more about Stuff for the Poor, call 815-476-5600 or log onto www.stuffforthe poor.com.