



# Footing the Cause

A trip to Africa opens a Kiwanian's eyes to the needs of children and inspires a project that puts shoes on thousands of feet

By Annemarie Mannion • Photos by Kellie O'Brien

Without shoes, children living in the arid, rural land of north-eastern Tanzania suffer cuts and other injuries from rocks and thorny bushes, or they contract worms. The injuries and illnesses can have long-lasting impacts, including keeping children from attending school.

Kiwanian Rich Rosenberg learned how important shoes are while he was on a safari trip in Africa in 2008 and took a side trip to visit a school.

"I noticed a lot of the children were barefoot," Rosenberg recalls, "and I asked the headmaster if it was because of choice or economics."

When he learned families couldn't afford footwear, he decided he needed to step in to help the children who live some 9,000 miles away from his home in Elmhurst, Illinois.

Seeing first-hand the disparity between the material wealth of his own country and those children walking barefoot to school was all that was required to motivate Rosenberg to found the nonprofit organization Soles for Africa, which distributes shoes to schools in Africa.

"In America, we have shoes that we throw away," he says. "We throw them away because our kids have outgrown them or because they're out of style, but they're still in good condition."

Rosenberg knew he could find an ample supply of shoes, but he need-

*Children in Tanzania wear shoes donated by Soles for Africa. The gently-worn shoes, donated in March 2011, were collected by Key Club students at York Community High School in Illinois.*



ed volunteers to collect them. That's where his hometown York Community High School Key Club fits in. The teens agreed to gather new or gently-worn summer shoes, including sandals, flats and gym shoes. Club advisor and teacher Brienne Kennedy-Brooks says members have embraced the cause.

"Soles for Africa was one of those projects where the kids took it on and it really just exploded," Kennedy-Brooks says. "They truly went above and beyond to get the community involved in the drive. Initially we assumed the bins would only be placed in the high school, but they took the initiative to get them out to the elementary and middle schools as well."

### Kids helping kids

Rosenberg likes the idea that Soles for Africa has created a link between American teens and their African counterparts.

"It's kids helping other kids," Rosenberg says.

So far, the nonprofit—with the Key Club's help—has distributed more than 3,000 pairs of shoes.

Rosenberg's greatest challenge wasn't finding a supply, but the high tariffs that made it very costly to ship the shoes to such countries as Botswana and Namibia. To overcome this obstacle, he connected via a local church with Kellie O'Brien, a woman from Hinsdale, Illinois, who in 2006 founded the O'Brien School for the Maasai, located near the small village of Sanya Station in Tanzania.

O'Brien agreed that shoes are needed in and around the village, where land is heavily grazed by cows and goats and, as a consequence, is dusty and covered with thorny bushes.

The shoes are shipped, along with other items such as desks and school

supplies, in cargo containers that are being sent to the school.

Headmaster Joseph Mjingo of the O'Brien school says the shoes are much appreciated.

"In a dusty and hot environment like Sanya Station, students toes are attacked by worms that are found in the dust," Mjingo says. "They definitely need shoes to cover their feet."

His students walk two miles to school, and the harsh environment means shoes wear out quickly.

"The students do everything possible to continue wearing their shoes," he says. "When their feet grow, many just cut away the toe (of the shoe)."

But the need isn't too great for members of the York High School Key Club. They are up to the challenge, inspired by Rosenberg's passion for helping others.

"He makes big ideas seem simple and doable," Kennedy-Brooks says.

When he first met with Key Club members, he gave each a small stuffed toy animal.

"He told us about how nice it feels to get a gift just because you weren't expecting it," Kennedy-Brooks says. "By then, the kids were drawn in."

Founding Soles for Africa is not Rosenberg's first foray into nonprofit work. He and his wife, Barbara, started an organization, Special Kids Day, which organizes holiday and birthday parties for children with special needs.

"It was already in our hearts to help children," Rosenberg says. "This was just another opportunity to fill the needs of a child." **KM**

*A group of happy girls holds up their new shoes, sent to them from Key Club students in the United States. Soles for Africa founder Rich Rosenberg likes that the project is "kids helping other kids."*



