



Changing lives – one bike at a time!

Local charity gives Namibians access to transportation and opportunity.

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Changing lives – one bike at a time



BY CYNTHIA
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Seb Oran has visited 60 countries in 43 years. Her goal: 100.

"To me travelling is the biggest education anyone can receive," says Oran. "And when I say travelling, I'm not talking about five-star hotels!"

Oran spent six months backpacking through sub-Saharan Africa when she was 29. She says the experience changed her outlook on life. She was surprised at how warm and happy people were, even those who lived in poverty.

"Anywhere you go in sub-Saharan Africa, there are so many people who we would define as poor, who have only basic food and shelter, but who still have such pleasant dispositions," she says.

She left the continent at the end of her trip, but the people she met stayed in her thoughts.

"Once you have Africa in your heart, it never leaves," she says.

So 14 years later, when Oran had the opportunity to improve the living standard of a group of orphans in Namibia, she took it.

It all started when Oran and her friend, Sandra Gattola, read an article in the Ottawa Citizen last winter. The story was about children in South Africa who had to walk five kilometres to school and back every day. The article mentioned how a bicycle would make a big difference in these children's lives.

The two considered buying a bike to donate to a North American organization called Bicycles for Humanity. But after some thought, says Oran, they decided to start an Ottawa chapter of the grassroots charity. She says they wondered: "Why buy one bike when you can channel an entire community effort?"

Bicycles for Humanity is a charitable organization dedicated to improving the lives of people in developing countries who do not have access to transportation. With a bicycle, women can carry their goods to market or fetch water. Children can get to school and not be too tired to learn when they arrive. Small communities can generate income through rentals and maintenance work.

Currently, Bicycles for Humanity operates only in Namibia, but it is looking to expand soon to Uganda, says Oran. The organization cooperates with a local group, like Bicycle Empowerment Network Namibia, that can supervise the project on the ground.

Oran and Gattola founded the Ottawa chapter in April, followed by a June downtown "meet and greet" to raise funds and promote awareness. They set an initial goal to fill one 40-foot container with used bicycles.

In order to raise enough money to ship the container overseas, Bicycles for Humanity needed community support. They held a benefit concert in September, with the help of local bands. Heather Hanna, a Centretown resident and music producer, came on board to organize the benefit.

"For me to take a minute amount of time out of my life was totally worth it," says Hanna. "I just don't understand why we can't reach out to people in developing countries and lend a hand when we are so fortunate."

All the artists played the benefit for free. Around 200 people showed up, contributing enough money to send the container to Africa.

"Promotion was through the roof successful," Hanna says. "It was amazing to see how many people came out of the woodwork."

Oran and Gattola achieved their donation goal with a bike drive on Sept. 29. They collected nearly 350 bikes, as well as new backpacks and soccer gear, to fill up the container. They sealed it off late in the afternoon, says Oran, and it is currently on its way to Namibia.

The container will take six to eight weeks to travel across the ocean and then 700 kilometres overland to Rundu.

The container the bikes are being shipped in will become a building with windows and a door, says Oran.

The new building will become a bicycle repair shop and provide opportunities for income generation, as some bikes will be rented out or sold.

Bicycles for Humanity's local partner, the Bicycle Empowerment Network, will also train local people in bicycle maintenance.

The bicycles will go to the House of Love for Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Rundu, says Gattola. The entire effort will cost around \$9,000.

In Namibia, says Oran, 60 per cent of people do not have access to transportation other than their feet. But with a bike, a person can travel twice as fast, three times as far as they can on foot while transporting four times the load.

The House of Love is a volunteer group that takes care of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS. The orphans are placed in homes within the community, often headed by grandmothers. They have access to food and a kindergarten through House of Love.

Oran describes the initiative as a "hand up, not a hand out," for the people of Rundu. She says she hopes the project will help the community more than foreign aid could. Unlike traditional government-funded aid projects, grassroots organizations allow donors to almost see and touch the individuals who benefit from their work, she says.



TAYLOR TURNER, CENTRETOWN NEWS

The Ottawa chapter of Bicycles for Humanity collected 350 bikes last month.

Oran is a vocal proponent of grassroots charity work. She says the fact that no money is taken from donations to cover administrative costs is a powerful motivating factor for people to donate. Another is the opportunity to reach out to an individual.

"The power of grassroots is one small community affecting another community," she says. "We know exactly where this [donation] is going." She adds donors will be able to track their bikes through photos and reports from the Bicycle Empowerment Network.

Other organizations have taken up the charity challenge in Ottawa. Sole Responsibility is a similar grassroots organization with an international mission. The group collects used shoes to send to refugee camps.

Between 2006 and 2007 campaigns, Sole Responsibility collected 10,000 pairs of shoes, enough to fill a 40-foot container, says "shoe collector" Jennifer North.

Their shipment cost around \$17,000, 90 per cent of which was raised directly from donors, as people were asked to contribute a toonie for each pair of shoes they donated.

North says Sole Responsibility asked the United Way and other local charities if they needed any shoes before sending off the crate. She says they were told to go ahead and send the shoes overseas.

The Snowsuit Fund is another organization committed to lending a hand.

The board chairman, Alan Sevigny, says the organization donates 15,000 new or gently used snowsuits to area children every winter.

Many people think Ottawa is an affluent city, he says, and are surprised to find out how many needy children live here. But when asked if the popularity of international charities has affected people's generosity towards the Snowsuit Fund, Sevigny says no.

"It would be nice if we could help everybody [around the world]," he adds. "People in this community know how cold our winters are and the idea that a child would go through a winter without a snowsuit is difficult for a lot of people."

Oran says local charities are equally important as those geared towards helping out in the developing world.

Whatever cause a person chooses to support, they should support it passionately, she says. She and Gattola just happen to be passionate about bicycles.

"I've always had everything that I've needed," says Gattola. "For me, what makes me feel good is that [this charity] is so simple. It makes so much sense: a bike. We take them for granted here."

For Oran, working with Bicycles for Humanity is "soul food." It is also an opportunity to continue her travels.

Her next stop? "Morocco!"

And then she will continue on to Namibia in October. Gattola will be joining her friend for a tour of the country to see first hand how their donations are changing lives.

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