

Small Packages

Packed with treasures by people a world away, shoe box gifts spread joy and hope to children around the globe.

by Patricia Tripp Cox

The Christmas rush comes early at Pinedale Christian Church in Winston-Salem — the Monday before Thanksgiving, to be exact. On that day each year, Pinedale’s Family Life Center teems with a frenzy of activity from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., as people from the Triad arrive in cars, vans, and trucks loaded down with gift-wrapped shoe boxes.

What’s in the boxes? Robert Cline and Devon Dibartole from Pinedale’s day care center can’t resist a peek as they enter the building and are surrounded by stacks of brightly colored boxes. As they lift the lids of a few within their reach, the joy packed inside escapes and lights their faces with bright smiles: Each one is filled with small toys, candy, and crayons, along with school supplies, soap, and toothpaste.

It is a reaction that will be repeated millions of times as these shoe boxes are delivered to children around the world who are in desperate circumstances because of war, poverty, or neglect. To most of those children, each shoe box is a treasured gift, a welcome invasion into their bleak world, and for many, the first gift they have ever received.

Everybody’s doing it

Eight years ago, Danny Spainhour, singles’ and missions minister at Pinedale, saw the need for a regional collection center for Operation Christmas Child (OCC), a ministry of Samaritan’s Purse, the international Christian relief organization headquartered in Boone. He made arrangements for the church to accept that challenge as part of their missions program. Since then, Spainhour has served as coordinator, a role he clearly enjoys. He greets most of the volunteers by name as they come in, calling out, “How many boxes this year?” “Over 1,600, and some people will drop them off individually,” responds Dave Pitts, director of mail services at North Carolina Baptist Hospital. Pitts started participating in OCC three years ago and then persuaded the hospital administration to participate as well.

Boxes continue to flow in, from churches and relay centers in Madison, Rural Hall, Advance, Greensboro, Reidsville, Mayodan, Madison, Winston-Salem, and others — 54,488 boxes by day’s end, enough to fill 10 Roadway trucks.

“It’s been a good thing for our people,” says Shannon Newsome of Reidsville Christian Church. “Our teens get involved. Our people would get upset if we didn’t give them the opportunity to do it now. We more than doubled this year — 185 boxes.”

“I look at it as one of the greatest outreaches, and it brings people together — everybody’s doing it,” exclaims Doris Conrad of Winston-Salem, who has found new purpose through this children’s outreach program.

With the help of her neighbor, Rollen Eller, Conrad has turned a large room in her home into a temporary storage area for toys and necessities, which she buys all year to put into Christmas shoe boxes — 250 of them last year. “I went into this Lowe’s store. They had the cutest stuffed animals. The sign said 50 cents, reduced from \$3.99. I said, ‘I want them all, 250,’ ” she says. “When I checked out, people were staring. I told them, ‘I know you’ve heard of Samaritan’s Purse shoe boxes,’ and then they were all saying, ‘good, good.’”

Samaritan’s Purse president Franklin Graham became involved with the Christmas gift project because of his concern for hurting children in the world. In 1993, when kids in the United States began participating in OCC, some 28,000 shoe boxes filled with soap, toothpaste, school supplies, and toys were sent to children in Bosnia. Since then, this project has grown exponentially, and by 2003, Christmas shoe boxes have been hand-delivered to more than 24 million underprivileged children in more than 100 countries.

Organized chaos

The journey starts when someone fills an empty shoebox. They take it to their participating church or group. From there it is transported to a relay center. During National Collection Week, always the week before Thanksgiving, volunteers at the relay centers pack shoe boxes in cases and deliver them to a collection center like the one at Pinedale, which is the largest in North Carolina. Then, the Samaritan’s Purse trucks transport boxes to the closest processing center. There are six processing centers in the United States, and the largest of those is in Charlotte. These centers are staffed by an amazing number of volunteers of all ages — 36,000 last year in Charlotte alone — giving their time not just willingly but joyously.

“We start taking reservations [to schedule volunteers] in April,” explains Joey White, manager of the Charlotte processing center and field representative for OCC in North Carolina and South Carolina. But even by February, there is already a waiting list of those who want to work at the center. Churches bring in groups. Other volunteers travel at their own expense from as far away as Texas and California and stay from a week to several months. For some, it is an annual event.

As the boxes come in from regional collection centers, volunteers at the processing center along nine assembly lines check each one (of all 1.7 million shoe boxes last year), removing inappropriate items and filling up boxes that have empty spaces. The boxes and lids have been wrapped separately and secured by a rubber band for ease of inspection. Any unsuitable items are donated to local charities.

“I think the best part is opening the box and seeing a person’s heart,” says Jean Hunt, a volunteer from Illinois, as she checks gift-filled boxes along the assembly line. At the end of the assembly line, boxes are taped up, put into a sea container, and sent to a port to be shipped out. “Organized chaos” is how John Allison, a retired mailman from Charlotte, describes it as he shrinkwraps caseloads of boxes coming off the assembly lines. “With nine lines humming, it’s all we can do to keep up. This brings out the best and the worst in you. If the Lord wasn’t in it, we couldn’t do it.”

“We stop and pray twice a day,” explains a greeter at the front door. Pointing to a life-size poster of two boys in a foreign land receiving shoe box gifts, she observes, “I’ve looked at this poster every day for two weeks, but I noticed something this morning. The two boys are holding up their pants with one hand and holding their shoe box in the other. They don’t have belts.” She decides to start adding belts to her shoe boxes.

The smooth organization at the Charlotte processing center is remarkable, considering the volume of boxes handled. And the atmosphere is joyous, almost casual, reminiscent of a family reunion.

Once the boxes are transported around the world, Samaritan’s Purse representatives and national partners receive them and travel by truck, bus, train, helicopter, boat, foot, dogsled, mule, and even camel to hand deliver the gifts.

A little bit of hope

What motivates so many people of all ages to become involved with this program? “There’s something about this ministry that [makes] people feel like they’re a family,” says Graham. “We ask that everyone who packs a box pray for the one who will receive it. I don’t know who will receive it, but God does. I want them to know that God cares for them ... to bring a little bit of hope into their lives.”

Graham tells about a young boy in Bosnia who handed back the shoe box he was given, saying he didn’t want a box; he wanted parents. Being urged to take the box, he finally did and opened it to find toys, gloves, a warm hat, and a picture of a couple with their address. With the help of an interpreter, he wrote and thanked them. A childless couple, they later adopted him. “God intended that box to go to that person. This is a God thing. People ask me how I made this so big. I didn’t do it. I’m not that smart. God has done this.”

Occasionally, some of the children from overseas come to the United States. Sudanese “Lost Boy” James Luom — one of 3,000 Sudanese boys who walked 1,000 miles, barefoot and starving, across Sudan before eventually journeying to the United States — received a shoe box gift while living in a refugee camp in Africa.

“I thanked God for this gift from a person I have never seen,” he says. “It made me feel like I was loved by someone and wasn’t forgotten.” Now living in North Carolina, Luom makes shoe box gifts for hurting kids in his homeland.

Sometimes, people from the United States accompany the shoe boxes to their local destination. In 2000, Spainhour traveled with the Samaritan’s Purse team to Kosovo to hand out boxes at a school that Samaritan’s Purse had helped rebuild after the Kosovo Albanian war.

“They brought the kids into school on a Saturday morning, and we had, in a big room out front, a special presentation. We sang some songs and then told them, ‘These are presents we want to give you, but we also want to tell you about the greatest present of all, and

that's Jesus Christ," says Spainhour. "Then we gave them the boxes ... I said, '1,2,3, open your packages!' They wouldn't rip the paper. They were so careful. They liked it because it was so colorful."

Spainhour watched as one of the boys opened his box and pulled out a baseball glove. "He didn't know what to do with it. So I grabbed an interpreter and asked him, 'Do you know what it is?' He said, 'No.' "I looked in the box, and they had put a baseball in there, too. So we started playing ball. He was the hit of the class. We almost got in trouble playing ball in the classroom."

Since its inception, Operation Christmas Child has benefited millions of children around the world. Not only have these shoe boxes brought joy to the recipients but also to the givers. Joy can still be found at Christmas — and packaged and shipped — in an unlikely container, a simple shoe box.

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