

Cheerful giver program helps needy around the globe



28OCT11sewingA028. Apostolic Christian Church runs a cheerful giver program where they sew items and put kits together for Third World countries. Tyana Kovacs (right), 9, learns to sew under the tutelage of Ruth Budimlic so that she may soon contribute her skills. Peter Lee/Record staffSource: Record staff

By Liz Monteiro, Record staff

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KITCHENER — As a young girl living in the former Yugoslavia, Juljana Joca recalls receiving a yellow pencil with an eraser from the Red Cross.

“I was so happy,” says the 72-year-old Kitchener woman. “I know what it feels like to receive something.”

Her mother died in childbirth, and Joca was raised by her father. It was shortly after the Second World War and Joca recalls hard times.

The gift of a pencil and eraser remains a pleasant memory and one that motivates her to give to others today.

"This is very special. I wish people thought about this," said Joca, as she inserted drawstrings into the top of a bag during a recent sewing night.

Joca is among a group of women who gather every Friday night at the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarene) on Strasburg Road to sew bags. The cloth bags are then stuffed with items such as towels, nail clippers, soap, and toothbrushes and toothpaste.

The health kits are given to the Kitchener-based Mennonite Central Committee Ontario who then distributes the kits to people in need throughout the world.

In the church hall, about a dozen sewing machines are taken out of storage each week and set up on individual tables. Joca can't see well so she saves the sewing for other volunteers. Her job is to insert drawstrings in the bags.

The Cheerful Giver Program started about four years ago in the home of churchgoer Florika Pauser. Women gathered in her living room to sew the bags and this fall moved to the church.

Pauser, a seamstress in Serbia before moving to Canada 20 years, sewed clothes for her seven children. She also sewed wedding gowns and dresses for special occasions.

"I can sew 100 bags in two days," she said.

Dan Weinhardt, co-ordinator for the program, said material for the bags is donated and the church also buys from suppliers wherever they can get a good deal. Putting a relief kit together costs about \$25 to \$28.

The church budgets about \$75,000 for the Cheerful Giver Program and that money buys the items for the kits. The money is donated by church members and collected through fundraising events at the church.

Weinhardt said he hopes the program can grow with the help of corporate donations and sponsors.

"There is a growing sense of need in the world," Weinhardt said. "It's clear in the Bible to help those in need. It's our Christian duty."

The \$4-million church located on four acres of land in southwest Kitchener was built in 2007 with money collected from devout churchgoers, said Weinhardt.

Many congregants who are working in the trades were able to help with construction, saving the church money, he said. The general contractor for the building was a member at the church.

Each week about 500 people attend Sunday service. Many of the congregants and their families hail from the former Yugoslavia, Germany and other Eastern European countries. The church has seven volunteer ministers who preside over Sunday service.

Pauser's daughter, Darlene, said she hopes the program can expand to include anyone who wants to volunteer.

"It isn't a church thing. It's a humanitarian thing. Anyone can do this," she said.

"I love the community feel. We bridge the gap by getting the older people and younger people out while helping other people around the world," Pauser said.

The program also introduces sewing to young girls. Ruth Budimlic of Cambridge helps young girls learn how to sew by learning how to sew straight lines, turns and backstitching on paper.

Nine-year-old Andrea Nechacov is excited about learning to sew and is hoping she gets to move up with the "real" sewers soon.

The Apostolic Christian Church is one of the largest suppliers of kits to the Mennonite Central Committee Ontario.

Bob Lebold, who oversees the shipment of kits around the world for the local MCC office, said he's amazed at the work done by the Apostolic Christian Church.

"It's just awesome the job that they do," he said. Last year, the church put together 9,000 kits and this year they assembled another 9,000 kits.

A month ago, about 50 volunteers came to church on a Thursday night and on a Saturday to pack 3,000 kits into boxes. The boxes were then packed into a transport truck and delivered to the MCC Kent Street office. Another packing day is set for December, Weinhardt said.

The kits assembled at the church have gone to Pakistan, Tanzania, Ukraine, Iraq and North Korea, Lebold said.

"Without churches like the Apostolic Christian, we wouldn't be able to do what we do. It gives me goose bumps," he said.

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