

Sew, what are you going to do?

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DEIRDRE HEALEY

I know for a fact that ordinary people can make a difference.

I have an aunt, Wendy Hagar, who went from living her life as a suburban mother raising two children and working as an executive assistant to touching the lives of more than 125,000 people spanning 80 different countries.

It probably sounds like she must have done something drastic to take her life in such an ambitious direction and make such an impact. But the truth is she simply decided to follow through on a goal she had set for herself.

It all began in February 2000. She was sitting in church, listening to a missionary describe the hardships faced by thousands of orphans and abandoned children in the former Soviet Union.

Her first thought was to reach into her wallet and make a donation, but she didn't. That would be too easy. She thought she should be doing something more.

So she set a goal to sew 100 baby overalls, 100 pairs of mitts and stuff 100 gift bags with items for young children that she could send to an orphanage.

However, setting a goal for herself wasn't enough. She had to tell her family about her plan. She knew that once she said it out loud, her goal would change from just a lofty idea to something she had to commit to. The ironic part of all of this is that my aunt hates to sew.

That detail aside, she made a trip to the fabric store and hunkered down behind the sewing machine. Friends, family and even complete strangers who spotted her at the store buying up 50 colouring books or tubes of toothpaste became intrigued.

When she told them about her goal, her enthusiasm caught on and within weeks, volunteers were coming by her house to help sew bags and stuff them with knitted items, school supplies, toys and toiletries.

Local newspapers ran her story, strangers offered their help and donations poured in.

Instead of 100, my aunt ended up shipping more than 1,700 bags to the orphanages and it didn't stop there.

People continued to want to help and her home soon became a gift-bag factory filled with donated sewing machines, fabric and boxes full of other items.

She began making gift bags for widows, single moms and the homeless -- each bag's contents customized according to the age, gender and needs of the specific country. She connected with mission teams who offered to deliver the bags.

Before she knew it, my aunt had managed to establish her own non-profit organization, which she named Sew on Fire.

Sierra Leone, Tibet, Uganda, Kosovo, Peru, Sudan, India, Israel and Guatemala are just a few of the places where her bags have brought smiles to people struggling in poverty.

Bags have also touched the lives of people closer to home including AIDS patients in Toronto, teenagers in nearby youth detention centres, and refugees who have escaped to Canada.

It's surreal to see the photos of people receiving the gift bags oceans away. Pulling out a blanket that was hand-knitted by my grandmother or my mother, who, like many others close to my aunt, do what they can to help out.

To date, more than 100 volunteer groups from across Canada have supported Sew on Fire.






My aunt, who is still the same suburban mother she was before all of this began, has now done more than 70 speaking engagements and tomorrow is holding the official opening of the Sew on Fire warehouse -- a 3,000-square-foot facility in Burlington where volunteers will spend 700 hours a month sewing, assembling and shipping gift bags.

All of this happened bit by bit and began with a simple goal to do more than what was expected.

To say I am proud is an understatement.

My aunt has inspired me to believe that ordinary people can make a difference and I hope through this column she will continue to inspire many more.

Find out more about Sew on Fire by visiting, www.sewonfire.com.



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