

Resident is Sew on Fire for charity

Wendy Hagar devotes hours upon hours filling bags with necessities

By Melanie Cummings

Special to the Post

Wendy Hagar doesn't shop in small quantities.

Six thousand pencil cases were checked off her last shopping list.

It's admittedly tough to stuff all that into a shopping cart.

And after six years of shipping bags chock full of everything from Band-Aids to baby bottles and baseball gloves to books, Hagar has even outgrown the 1,000-sq. ft. warehouse that houses all the good work accomplished by her Sew on Fire Ministries charity.

To date Hagar and countless volunteers and missionaries have delivered 70,000 care packages to 72 countries.

She spends three days and nights of every week sewing fabric satchels and stuffing them with items a baby, child, woman, man and teacher need for comfort, betterment, warmth and entertainment.

Made a commitment to help

Hockey bags filled to the zipper are at the ready for transport by like-minded missionaries to places near and far: from the streets where Toronto's homeless sadly live, to orphanages in impoverished remote rural villages in all corners of the Earth.

It's not uncommon for Hagar to find boxes full of anonymously donated toys and trinkets on the steps approaching the obscure warehouse that is tucked in behind a Harrington Court industrial mall.

Back in February 2000 the drop-off spot was the front porch of her home. Within two weeks of starting Sew on Fire Ministries, the Hagar family home was turned into mini-manufacturing plant.

In short measure seven rooms in her home were stuffed to the ceiling with donated boxes full of hand-knitted hats, mittens, blankets, candy, hair clips, balls, underwear, balloons, fabric and hotel-sized shampoos, soaps and toothpaste.

The story told by a missionary visiting her local church, Glad Tidings Pentecostal, about a newborn baby in Ethiopia being swaddled in newspapers stayed with Hagar.

"I knew I had to make a commitment to help."



FIRED UP FOR CHARITY:

After six years of shipping bags filled with everything from toiletries to baby bottles and baseball gloves to books, Wendy Hagar has even outgrown the 1,000-sq. ft. warehouse that houses all the good work accomplished by her Sew on Fire Ministries charity. Crossroads came to the rescue of the Hagar family offering part of its warehouse space. That was three years ago and today it is packed to the rafters with items ready to be shipped to the less fortunate.

So that day, unable to eat and her stomach in knots, Hagar put her discomfort aside and went shopping.

She bought up bolts of fabric and yarn and set to work on filling 100 bags with baby pyjamas, receiving blankets, knit hats and mittens.

Word of her quest travelled fast.

"Mainly because I got to talking everywhere I went about it," said Hagar. She found herself handing out her address to complete strangers eager to help.

Soon she had a house full of people sewing and packing, retailers offering discounts and church workers of all denominations requesting care packages.

"For three years my family never ate at the dining room table, and six sewing machines dominated the kitchen counter space," said Hagar.

An army of volunteers

Like a tidy up television show, Crossroads came to the rescue of the Hagar home offering part of its warehouse space. That was three years ago and today it is packed to the rafters.

"God sent me an army of wonderful people to help me, including husband, Jeff, son Matt, and daughter, Sarah, and loads of angels with cash and donations. I couldn't do any of this without the legions of good-hearted souls that have done so much for Sew on Fire," said Hagar.

The regular crews of volunteers who show up every Monday afternoon have packing down to a science. They can fill 100 bags in 20 minutes. And such speed is necessary when there's an order for 1,000 care packs on its way to Poland or Africa.

"What's more important than filling the needs of people? There are 2,300 verses in the Bible about caring for the poor. God is screaming out this message. We'd have to be deaf not to hear," she said.

In light of that Hagar is quick to request assistance. She needs sewers to stitch together about 20,000 fabric bags from donated material, a bigger warehouse to stow all the donations, free of charge, of course, more rubber balls and small, hand-sized toys.

"About 80 per cent of the world's wealth is in North America. To much is given, much is required," added Hagar.

She opens her heart and home

Plight of ex-Soviet orphans spurs woman to mass produce gift bags

BURLINGTON

The Hagar family started losing pieces of their house in early February.

First it was the dining room, then the living room.

The kitchen went next, followed by a bedroom.

The family room is in jeopardy.

"Thank God for summer," Wendy Hagar says. "We can eat outside."

It started when Wendy was at Glad Tidings Pentecostal Church, listening to Ron Garrison, a founder of Mission Partners International.

Garrison was describing hardships faced by orphans in the former Soviet Union, including thousands of abandoned children who are undernourished and sick.

"My heart was so heavy," Wendy recalls. "I knew I had to do more than put money in a collection plate. On the way home I made a commitment to make 100 gift bags, filled with 100 mitts and 100 overalls."

She hit fabric shops and stores, buying, begging and borrowing.

"God has given me a huge boldness."

She shared stories of her commitment and others climbed aboard, turning her home into a workshop.

"God sent me friends."

He sent teens, adults and seniors. They included people from her church, other churches, co-workers and even strangers. One woman asked if she could bring her seven-year-old son, adopted from an orphanage in Romania.

"Whenever he's at a birthday party or any other celebration, he cries, thinking of the poor children he left behind. This will show him there are people who truly care about those children."

She set up a sewing machine in the kitchen but needed a four-thread serger.

"They're expensive, about \$1,200."

She put an ad in the paper, asking for a serger and explaining she had only \$275 to spend.

"I prayed to God, 'Please let someone with a serger read my tiny ad in The Hamilton Spectator. And let it be



Mike Hanley

someone prepared to sell at that price."

Bingo. A woman called and she was so impressed with the work being done, she threw in a bolt of material.

It wasn't long before she had three more sergers on her kitchen table along with two sewing machines. The dining room is the assembly line where her friends fill bags by the hundreds. And the living room and bedroom have become storage areas with bags covering the floor, furniture and bed.

She has volunteers to her house Monday afternoons and every weekday evening.

"I haven't heard one complaint from my family," says the 44-year-old mother of two teens.

"This is their home but they've been wonderful. They even take turns at the sewing machines."

On hockey nights, her husband, Jeff, sits in the family room, sharing the television with sport-minded members of the work party.

"I can't believe how supportive my family has been. I'm very proud."

During the past three months, they've filled thousands of bags with goodies she's been able to scrounge or buy at bargain-basement prices including writing pads, colouring books, pens, pencils, crayons, sharpeners, erasers, combs, tissue, rubber balls and candies.

The bags also include five balloons — including one that reads "I love you."

"For many of the children, it will be the only thing they've owned. It lets them know someone cares and that God has not forgotten them."

They will also receive toothpaste, diapers, overalls, hats, mitts, socks and quilts.

The elderly have not been forgotten.



MIKE HANLEY, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Wendy Hagar supervises volunteers as they assemble 1,500 care packages in the living room of her Burlington home for orphanages in the former Soviet Union.

She has bags filled with nightgowns, socks, slippers, blankets, combs, shaving gear, nail clippers, shampoo and cologne.

"I designed the bags," Wendy says. "And I don't even sew. In fact, I hate sewing. This has to be a God thing. He showed me how ... big time."

They've already sent a thousand

bags and they're showing no signs of letting up.

"We don't want any glory. We just want more stuff."

Call me with your story ideas from Haldimand-Norfolk, Niagara, Brant and Halton at (905) 526-3299. Or e-mail mhanley@hamiltonspectator.com.