



Back-to-school shopping that actually makes a difference

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Robin Mednick, 58

- Co-founder, president and executive director, Pencils for Kids (P4K), pencilsforkids.com.

When the beginning of the school year rolls around and parents and kids go shopping for school supplies, most of them would not fathom having to share one pencil with 29 other kids. In Libore, a small village in the Republic of Niger, Africa, children, were doing exactly that – that is, until 2005, when Robin Mednick started to raise funds (\$500,000 to date) to send more than 6,000 kilograms of pens, pencils, rulers, geometry sets and notebooks, reaching most of the 6,000 students there.

Motivating factor

“In December, 2005, my friend Dan Galbraith [now vice-chairman of P4K] told me he had just returned from the Francophone Games in Niger, and was devastated by the poverty. He said Canadian athletes had visited a school in Libore and noticed that 30 children were sharing a single pencil. My heart broke, and I simply said, ‘Dan, let’s do something.’”

First step

“I called the Canadian consulate in Niger, to ask if they could distribute supplies if we sent them. They connected me with Amadou Madougou, the mayor of Liboré. We spoke that night, he sent a list of necessary supplies [pencils, paper, notebooks, rulers, erasers, chalk, slate boards and textbooks] and the next day I approached Michael Williams, then manager of Business Depot.”

Success

“Roumanatou Moussa Zanguina, 20, lives five kilometres from school. She was not eligible for a scholarship last year so she did everything in her power to get one this year. Every day she walked 20 kilometres to and from school to learn. It worked! She did so well that this year she has received a scholarship and is in her final year.”

Donations

“\$5 can buy a textbook; \$100 can build a desk shared by three children (many are still sitting on the hard ground); \$600 can sponsor a scholarship for one girl for one year – this includes her uniforms, books, supplies and tutoring in four subjects for the entire school year; \$2,000 can sponsor a kindergarten.”

Challenges

“We no sooner build a school, and it is overflowing with students. We invest money in teaching girls to sew, and sometimes they must leave school early to assist their families in the field.”

Any doubts?

“The first time I wondered if we would ever get off the ground, was when I placed my first call to DHL Canada to ship over our very first test box with supplies. The cost was extremely high. It was the first stumbling block. So I faxed a letter to the president of DHL requesting assistance, and within 30 minutes he agreed to help. Over the years, DHL has shipped many boxes for us at no expense.”

Describe yourself

“I am unlikely to take “no” for an answer when confronted with obstacles. I not only believe in thinking out of the box, I don’t understand why there is a box.”

Personal hero

“Winnie the Pooh, he builds meaningful relationships and is genuine, loyal and trustworthy. And somehow he manages to negotiate challenges with sweetness and kindness.”

What keeps you going?

“Two girls, Halimatou Tiémogo and Halimatou Soumana, recipients of our scholarships, shared their money and books with a third girl who hadn’t qualified for a scholarship. These are the moments that keep me going.”

What is next?

Our Farmers of the Future pilot program which teaches 200 kids in Grades 4, 5 and 6 to view agriculture as a business. By building mini-farms near primary schools, children irrigate the gardens, tend tree nurseries, tackle environmental issues, and learn to market their produce and invest their earnings.

Celebrity sponsor?

“Jian Ghomeshi: I would be honoured if he brought his compassion for people, insight, wit and wisdom to help further our cause.”

This interview has been condensed and edited.

Farah Mohamed is president & CEO of the G(irls)20 Summit. Send suggestions for Action Figure to livebetter@globeandmail.com.

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