

Soccer-loving kids get special delivery

When Paul Bourassa made his first trip to work in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, he often met children with no shoes, asking for money. He knew immediately that he couldn't return empty-handed next time.

So in December, Bourassa, his wife Kelly and their three children came back laden with boxes of shoes, soccer balls and toys.



Shoes that to us are used or out-of-style are valuable resources for children who have none.

"You help out when you can, where you can," he said.

"Things that we take for granted – like second-hand shoes that we don't wear because they're out of style or somewhat soiled – even though they can be cleaned, we just toss them out. And I thought to myself, 'Well if I'm going to come back, and that was the plan, why don't I dedicate one of my pieces of luggage to clothing?'"

Bourassa is currently on leave from his job as a federal Crown prosecutor and travels to Harare every few months to work for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. He also serves a Catholic trustee for the southern Alberta francophone school district and was recently elected vice-president of the Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association (ACSTA).



Soccer balls were shipped flattened so more could be shipped to Zimbabwe.

Over three dozen pairs of shoes, 25 soccer balls, and an assortment of other gifts were collected and delivered to children in Zimbabwe through the trustees' association, the Edmonton and Calgary Catholic school districts, and [Sports Central](#), an Edmonton-based charity.

The goods travelled more than 14,000 kilometres with Bourassa in his luggage and were delivered on Dec. 17 and 18 to be distributed by two Zimbabwean organizations, the charity [Harvesters in Sport](#) and the Harvester Christian Fellowship, which runs two orphanages.

"The kids were ecstatic, particularly those that love soccer!" said Hatiatyi Kwenda, the founder of Harvesters in Sport. Kwenda, who met Bourassa through the Canadian embassy in Zimbabwe, runs a drop-in program that caters to 300 children.

"They live in extremely difficult circumstances, but we are only able to have them on a drop-in basis until we can raise funds for orphanage structures," he said in an email interview. "Our care is through feeding, recreation, counselling, raising school fees and stationery."

While the older children will play with the soccer balls, the younger ones will have crayons to use as they develop their motor and skill development.

Kwenda is excited to begin an organized soccer training program for the children, with soccer coaches who will have their hands full this year.

For Bourassa and his family, the gifts added a special dimension to their time in Africa.

To find the resources he needed, Bourassa reached out to Cheryl Shinkaruk, the programs and projects manager for the Edmonton Catholic School District. For Shinkaruk, it was an opportunity to expand the district's commitment to caring for children.

"We want our children to receive everything possible that they need, to have a strong foundation for making them healthy, contributing members of society," she said.

"And by giving children across the world the opportunity to be physically active, by using a variety of different types of activities ... I believe is giving them the gift to be active. Children are meant to play, children are born to play."

Shinkaruk connected Bourassa with Sport Central, an Edmonton-based charity that donates sports supplies to disadvantaged children in Alberta as well as internationally.

Sheldon Oleksyn, the executive director of Sport Central, was glad to be part of the project, but he also stressed the needs of children in Alberta.

"We're certainly open to requests for equipment for people who are heading overseas, to poorer countries that we know have children in need," he said. "But more importantly, we are also looking for professionals who can verify any families or single parents that they know are in desperate need."



When the goods were delivered to Harvesters in Sport, the children responded by clapping twice, a Zimbabwean form of gratitude. Bourassa recalls his wife's face, joyful at the sight of happy children.

"We were completely humbled at the fact that such a fuss was made over us, for what little we actually did. She still is beaming, as am I," he said.

"Their joy knew no bounds at receiving the consignment," Kwenda added.

Bourassa also contacted his children's elementary school, Ste. Marguerite Bourgeoys in Calgary. He received shoes from students, as well as the contents of the school's lost and found, and more shoes continue to be collected for Zimbabwe.

While Bourassa is grateful for the opportunity to bring joy to children in Zimbabwe, he believes everyone can make a difference wherever they are.

"I would just gently suggest, keep your eyes open and your ear to the

ground, and if you see someone or some organization in need, do what you can in your own corner of the world.”

For more information, please visit the following websites:

- www.harvestersinsport.org
- sportcentral.org