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Compassion fills bins at Esquimalt warehouse

by Jody Patterson, Victoria Times Colonist

Hurricane Mitch was the clincher. Saanich councillor, Leif Wergeland, had been doing charity work in impoverished countries for almost 30 years by then, but he knew after witnessing the devastation in Honduras from the 1998 hurricane that he needed to do more.

And here's the result, a dimly lit warehouse in Esquimalt stacked to its very high roof with wheelchairs, crutches, clothing, pencils, incubators, bicycles and hospital beds, with box after box after box mysteriously labelled "Missionary #15" and "School #12," and a crowded little office where a group of women are patching bed-sheets.

"You should see it in here on a Friday morning," says Dell Marie Wergeland, Leif's sister-in-law and co-ordinator at the all-volunteer Compassionate Resource Warehouse. "That's when our seniors arrive. With all the people folding, sewing and packing, you'd think you were in a seniors' sweatshop."

The warehouse is the holding area for donated goods destined for churches, schools and hospitals all over the developing world. The requests they send in are often heartbreakingly simple, says Dell Marie: "One time, we had a hospital ask for a basin, saying they had one already but wanted to be able to wash it." Much of the need is for hospital equipment. The shipment being readied for Uganda next month will include cardiac monitors and X-ray equipment, no longer sufficiently state-of-the-art for a Canadian hospital but just fine for towns that may not even have beds for their patients.

Two weeks ago, a load of linens and clothing was shipped to a hospice in Ukraine.

Others write seeking pencils and paper for young students, a need the Wergelands hope to fill with a school-supplies drive at local stores in August and September. Still others need crutches and wheelchairs for their disabled citizens. They need first-aid kits, commodes and blankets, always blankets.

Leif Wergeland, a builder by trade, first experienced the joys of altruism in the early 1970s when he helped build houses in Ethiopia while travelling there. He built homes in a number of countries in the years after that, often taking with him teams of like-minded people willing to pay their own travel costs and chip in for building supplies. "It's probably the one thing that keeps balance in this life, to have the opportunity to give and share," he says. "One of the healthiest things you can do for yourself is work in some of these places and get to know the people." It was on such a trip to Honduras that the idea for the warehouse took shape. The first container-load - the size of a freight car - was sent out two years ago, and 19 more have since followed. "We've done 15 or 16 countries this year alone" says Leif. No potential donor is overlooked when shipments are being prepared. When an Alberta vitamin manufacturer asked if the warehouse would be interested in a discontinued line of multi-vitamins, the Wergelands took all \$125,000 worth. And no space goes to waste: If equipment looks like it might rattle en route, it's padded with bags of clothes and hand-knitted teddy bears, the specialty of a hard-core group of local knitters who have so far made 17,000 of them.

The Wergelands know of dozens more such skillful volunteers who they can call upon if needed, whether to refit an old computer or build a portable dental kit suitable for rugged

donkey rides into remote villages. Victoria dentist Brian Carr-Harris will be taking one of those kits with him when he travels to Uganda next month.

A steady flow of donations is obviously essential to the success of the warehouse, and Dell Marie is grateful to the Vancouver Island Health Authority, the Red Cross and Queen Alexandra Centre for Children for thinking of the Wergelands whenever they're getting rid of obsolete equipment. The warehouse has shipped out more than 350 crank-style hospital beds, and countless pairs of wooden crutches.

Public donations are also welcome (blankets, school supplies, and sturdy plastic dishware are particularly appreciated), but Dell Marie stresses that items need to be in good shape: "If you would be proud to stand beside somebody and present them with the donation yourself, then it's the kind of thing we want."

Target Storage on Princess Avenue accepts drop-offs on behalf of the warehouse. Leif acknowledges that any amount of donations won't solve all the problems of the world. But compassion has to start somewhere. "People see so many problems out there that they don't know what to do," he says. "We're trying to say that you can't help everyone, but you can definitely help some of them."

(Interested? Call Dell Marie Wergeland at 479-9342, or visit www.crwarehouse.ca)