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Volunteers with the Compassionate Resource Warehouse recently filled a 40-foot container in rural Saanich with items bound for Ghana.

Group provides assistance a world away

Compassionate Resource Warehouse raises supplies for people in need around the globe

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It is lunch time. The hungry are starting to file into the lunch room of the building the Compassionate Resource Warehouse (CRW) maintains in rural Saanich.

Women and men, many with grey hair and well past the half-century mark, walk past a table of coffee urns, cookies and other items that deliver calories quickly. Their mood is familiar and relaxed. They certainly have reasons to feel good about themselves. They just spent the morning filling a 40-foot-long container with items of every kind destined for Ghana.

But Dell Marie Wergeland, president of the society that runs the CRW, strikes a reflective note as she recalls a formative experience in her charity work.

The year was 1999 and Wergeland had travelled to Honduras to help with recovery efforts following Hurricane Mitch.

While visiting a local town, she asked a local why he wouldn't bother to fix a house door.

"He said, 'I want to show you something,'" she said. "We walked down to the hardware department and one screw was \$3. So he looked at me and said, 'I make \$2 a day. I have four children and I could either save for a day and half

and buy a screw and not feed my kids or I feed my children. What do I do?'"

While Wergeland does not recall the name of the man, whom she describes as very kind and non-judgemental, her encounter with him nonetheless left her with an indelible lesson about the importance of helping the less fortunate in a way that empowers them.

"The most important lesson is to use your ears and your eyes and your heart to basically understand where they are and what they are facing, and then figure out how you can come alongside and give them things that they will use to make their lives better, so it is not us saying, 'Here we are, that is what we are giving,'" she said.

This philosophy has found concrete impression in the work of the CRW. Launched in 1999, it collects, processes, packages and ships a variety of donated goods and equipment to responsible charities and other groups in Africa, Latin America, Asia, even Europe.

Notably though, the group does not initiate shipments themselves.

Rather, it works with local recipients through NGOs to draw up lists of needed items. This process ensures that the CRW does not send unneeded or unsuitable supplies. It also prevents goods from falling into the wrong hands once they arrive at their destinations.

Most importantly though, it gives recipients a sense of being in charge.

"You want to do something that builds their community, that builds them up," said Wergeland. "They take ownership of it," she said.

Wergeland knows that or-

ganizations like CRW often receive various degrees of criticism about helping others abroad while ignoring local needs.

Wergeland does not buy it. "My political message is people matter," she said. "And they matter overseas." While social problems also exist in developed nations like Canada, citizens of those countries have access to some form of a social safety net. No such provisions exist abroad.

Wergeland is realistic about the impact her group can make, as it is just one among countless charities that concern themselves with helping the less fortunate abroad. "They are lots of groups working, but the need is great," she said.

CRW has also helped locals. Most of the CRW volunteers are retired or semi-retired, and volunteering at CRW has afforded them the opportunity to use their past professional skills in the service of others, learn new skills and make new friends along the way.

"There is joy in helping someone, there is joy in sheer camaraderie," she said. "They laugh and joke and have a good time....and it gives them a sense of purpose."

This commitment can also be contagious. CRW often works with youth and school groups and Wergeland said members of those groups find pleasure in volunteering.

"I think people need that and people are looking for that," she said. "But it is easy to get consumed and getting caught up in meeting your own needs. And the reality is, when you meet other people's needs, you meet a lot of your own really good basic needs, the ones that make you valued as a person, your own self-esteem."