

South Jersey Local (southjerseylocalnews.com)

Life

Chatsworth woman stitches together a plan to help Haiti

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by Linda M. Jagiela
for The Central Record

Penny Miller works hard to help the people of Haiti. The Chatsworth resident has traveled to Haiti four times in four years to provide nursing care in clinics run by a Medford mission group. Between trips, she enlisted the help of area residents to sew skirts and dresses for Haitian women and girls and collected sewing machines to send to the Haitian people.

Penny's initial visit to Haiti was as a nurse with Hope Alive! Clinic Ministries in Haiti. Founded by Frank and Leslie Jacobs of Medford, the group solicits medical volunteers to take mission trips to its seven clinics and pharmacies in Haiti.

On that first trip, Penny saw that the clinic was giving out used clothing to Haitian women. She noticed that some of the women would not take slacks, and learned it was because they believed that Christian women did not wear slacks, only skirts.

Penny came back to the United States with the idea of sending skirts to the ladies of Haiti.

With the assistance of friends and church family from Lord of Life Lutheran Church in Tabernacle, she began making skirts. Over 175 skirts were shipped and given out during her next trip in 2009.

Penny continued her mission of assisting the Haitian people by collecting treadle sewing machines. Many areas of Haiti do not have power. The foot-powered machines would allow people to learn to sew for themselves, thus providing them with a trade and source of income.

The problem came in finding machines in good working order. Many treadle sewing machines are taken apart and their bases are used as tables. After putting out a plea to the community, Penny found 18 machines.

Her next stumbling block was the cost of shipping the machines to Haiti: \$100 per machine. To raise the money, Penny enlisted members of her church's women's ministries group, who made and sold bags used for microwaving potatoes.

The intent was to teach residents living near the Haitian clinics how to sew. Having such a long-distance project was difficult, so Penny hired someone in Haiti to make sure the project was moving forward.

"I hired a man to oversee the project in Haiti and he is sending me progress reports. He provides me a description of what they have made, and has told me that they have begun selling their wares," explained Penny.

Penny's plight for Haiti is ongoing. This year, she organized a program in which local seamstresses made little girls' dresses for Haitian orphanages. The community's outpouring of support was overwhelming, with seamstresses making 131 dresses. The dresses will be in Haiti when Penny arrives in February. She will visit the local orphanages to make the disbursements.

Penny finds that being a seamstress as well as a nurse keeps her hopping when she's in Haiti. When she is there, she often finds that residents' clothing is clean but worn. When not nursing, Penny spends a good deal of her free time sewing and fixing clothing in the orphanages.

"These people need a chance. They have no help from their government, and they are too poor to help one another," Penny said.

"When God has blessed you, you have got to help others. I am able to do that, and that is why I started it."

Penny is still collecting sewing machines, as well as fabrics and notions such as buttons and zippers.

To donate materials or machines, please contact Linda Jagiela at novedlinda@comcast.net.

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