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Salvation shared a shoebox at a time

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Esther Jones

Department of Physical Therapy students Tinelle Jardine (left) and Amy Trautwein (right) stop to smile for the camera while packaging gifts for Operation Christmas Child. The packing party was organized by Esther Jones, who serves as a regional coordinator for Operation Christmas Child and is administrative assistant in the Department of Physical Therapy at Andrews University.

Salvation shared a shoebox at a time

Michigan — Every November, the gymnasium at Niles Adventist School in Niles, Mich., fills up with brightly-colored shoeboxes full of items, both fun and functional, from toys to toothbrushes. Volunteers then load the boxes onto semi-trailers headed for processing centers in North Carolina or Minn. From there, the boxes are distributed to more than 8.3 million needy children around the world.

Esther Jones, along with her husband, Charles, of Niles, Mich., has coordinated Operation Christmas Child in the northwestern Indiana and southwestern Michigan area for the past 15 years. “We plan to be involved with OCC until they throw dirt over us!” Jones says. She has seen the project grow from 550 boxes to this year’s collection of 21,338 boxes.

Jones learned about the project from her sister. They decided to fill 40 boxes and take them to the nearest collection center, which was then in Indianapolis. Jones shared a promotional video with her church family at the Buchanan Seventh-day Adventist

Church. One member was in management at Wal-Mart. He then showed the video to other Wal-Mart associates, who began to pack boxes of their own. Within weeks, they had collected 550 boxes, and Wal-Mart provided transportation to Indianapolis for the next three years. By the third year, the number rose to 3,200 boxes, and the Niles Adventist School became an official collection center.

This year, students from the Department of Physical Therapy at Andrews University packed 65 boxes after Jones, administrative assistant in the department, presented OCC to the students in the classes of 2013 and 2014. “They embraced the project, and many chose to participate as one of their community service projects,” says Jones.

Ashleigh Jardine, a member of the class of 2014, recalls packing shoeboxes as an elementary school student at nearby Village Adventist Elementary School, another institution with which Jones herself works to pack boxes. When Jones brought the project to the Department of Physical Therapy, Jardine’s class held a packing party of their own. “It was the perfect oppor-

tunity for our class to bond; and, more importantly, for us to make a difference in the lives of these children,” she says.

When a child receives a shoebox, they are likely receiving their first Christmas gift. Often, it contains a personal note from the person who donated the box. These letters can lead to lifelong correspondences and friendships. In 2009, Jones had the opportunity to accompany Operation Christmas Child to the Dominican Republic. As an area coordinator, she handed Niles Adventist School collection site’s 100,000th shoebox to a little girl named Judelka.

“We saw God working in front of our eyes several times,” commented Jones. The children also receive a book in their language telling the story of salvation. “This is a fantastic way to assist in the completion of the Great Commission of Matthew 28,” says Jones. “What a joy it is to provide a child with most likely their first gift ever, and then for them to learn of the greatest gift, salvation. What could be better?”

Samantha Snively, student newswriter, Office of Integrated Marketing & Communication



Esther Jones

Department of Physical Therapy students Erika Mikkelsen (left background), Kaes Kammon (front center) and Zack Lusk (front right) help package donated toys for Operation Christmas Child. These gifts, including a booklet containing the story of salvation, are headed to the poorest children of the planet.