

This story is a departure from the usual "family" story. However, this story shows what one person can do!

Operation Knapsack

Brian Pounder has been a member of Stayner Heritage Society since the beginning.

Although he has lived and worked in Orillia for many years, he still has a place for Stayner in his heart!

The school term is over and a student at Park Street Collegiate Institute in Orillia, Ontario opens her locker with a sigh of relief. She dumps several handfuls of pencils, pens, coloured highlighters and markers into her battered knapsack. She rifles through her notebooks, some of them barely used, and stuffs them in. Three binders, a pencil case, some unused duo-tang folders, a calculator and her locker mirror also go in the bag.

There. The locker is ready for a new student in the fall. She dumps the knapsack in a large box filled with other bags and loose school supplies, then walks out the door.

She feels a tingle of excitement. Summer is about to begin.

Each year at the end of the school year, mountains of perfectly good leftover school supplies enter our landfill sites, but at five Ontario schools, these supplies will be picked up, sorted and shipped overseas to children in such impoverished countries such as Bangladesh, Guatemala, South Africa, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

Operation Knapsack is the brainchild of retired Orillia teacher, Brian Pounder, who despaired at such waste. His repeated suggestions that the supplies be kept and re-used the following year fell on deaf ears. After a vacation in the Dominican Republic alerted him of the desperate shortage of such materials in developing countries, he wondered how he could connect the need with the supply.

... "I met a high school friend, who is now a missionary in Honduras," explains Brian. "I asked her if she could use some school supplies. She answered, 'Yes'. I gathered a knapsack full of supplies for her from the empty lockers. It was then that I decided to turn a negative into a positive." That was in 1987. Today, Park Street Collegiate Institute, Orillia District Collegiate and Vocational Institute, Patrick Fogarty Secondary School,

Twin Lakes Secondary School and Elmvale District High School participate in the project. Brian supplies posters and morning announcements and decals for the collection boxes. His friend, Jack, helps him collect the filled boxes. Brian's garage morphs into a sorting station and other friends come to help. Every pencil is sharpened, every pen checked to ensure it works. Binders are cleared of used paper and checked for graffiti or damage. Good ones are kept for distribution, the others are recycled. Sometimes Brian finds himself holding a sharpened pencil and imagining the child who will receive it.

Brian and Jack package the pencils and pens in tennis ball containers. One container holds 75 pencils or 45 pens. After 20 years, he has the process pared down to a science. "A normal knapsack holds about 150 pencils, 90 pens, 6 erasers, 20 highlighters, 20 markers, 15 to 20 duo tangs, 3 or 4 binders, 12 rulers, two math sets, six pencil sharpeners, the odd mirror, calculators, paperclips, crayons, glue sticks and 20 tennis balls," lists Brian.

As an avid tennis player, he includes the fuzzy yellow tennis balls for play.

When he hears of people traveling to developing countries for vacation or business, he asks them to take supplies, eliminating shipping costs. He packages the school supplies in easy to carry knapsacks, boxes that fit into luggage or large hockey bags.

In retrospect, it makes perfect sense that Brian has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Geography and Economics, considering how many countries the supplies reach and the recycling value of his project.

His involvement both as a participant and a leader in Cubs and Scouts has led to his objective threaded throughout Operation Knapsack. "As a leader, one objective I tried to instill in the boys was to develop strong values and take an active part in creating a better world," he says. "I strongly believe this.

"This project keeps a lot of usable material from going into the landfill site. It also sends a message to our students about contributing to those in need throughout the world. Charity begins at home, whether it is my home, Orillia, Ontario, Canada, North America or the world and the world is our home. It is satisfying to know that you are helping children who have nothing."

Meanwhile, on another continent, perhaps in the Philippines, Ethiopia or India, a small child eagerly accepts a small package of pencils, a notebook, an eraser and a fluorescent yellow tennis ball. He examines each treasure with wonder. He rubs the fuzz of the tennis ball against his cheek and grins widely. He has never owned anything before.

He feels a tingle of excitement. School is about to begin.

If you would like to start such a project in your own school or city, please email Brian at brian.pounder@smpatico.ca. (Reprinted with permission)



Brian Pounder - one of Stayner's great friends.