

Wheels for the World

Donated wheelchairs send help and hope

BY DIANE GALE ANDREASSI
SPECIAL WRITER

Handicapped people crawling on their hands and knees in Ghana, West Africa, have received the first shipment of wheelchairs collected during a six-month drive spearheaded by two Farmington Hills women earlier this year.

"So many people in the village wore flip flops on their hands from dragging themselves around," according to Wheels for the World Detroit-area chairwoman Dorothy Pitsch.

The stories from missionaries who delivered the wheelchairs in Ghana, West Africa, were heart-breaking illustrations of poverty and gratitude from the recipients, according to Jan Glovak, who worked with Pitsch on the drive.

Earlier this year Pitsch and Glovak collected 631 wheelchairs, walkers and crutches to be distributed to handicapped people around the world. It was the largest collection of chairs from a single WFTW drive. The chairs came from 11 communities in the Detroit area.

"Many of these people wait for years and possibly a lifetime for a chance to receive one of these wheelchairs," Pitsch said. "We in this country take a wheelchair for granted and often dispose of them when they are no longer needed for personal use."

"I'm learning how important it is to get the message across to people in this country about how necessary it is for us to retrieve every walker, wheelchair and crutch and gather them into future drives," Pitsch added.

Wheelchairs are collected around the country during WFTW drives and then distributed to handicapped people in Third World countries. WFTW was established seven years ago by Joni Eareckson Tada, a mouth artist and Christian spiritual speaker, who became a paraplegic after a diving accident when she was 17 years old, more than 30 years ago.

Each wheelchair that Pitsch and Glovak collected came with a special story about the person who once used it. Most were from family members who no longer needed them; others were found in attics, basements, hospitals, schools, garages and even on the sides of roads.

Two of the wheelchairs were specially tagged so Pitsch could learn about the recipients. One of the wheelchairs belonged to West Bloomfield resident, Alex Graham, 17, who died earlier this year from a rare form of bone cancer that was first detected in her knee. Her leg was amputated when she was 16 in a desperate attempt to stop the cancer from spreading.

Shortly before her death, Graham was called by the Make a Wish Foundation.

Instead of the usual trip to Disney World, or celebrity visit, this teenager asked to produce a

public service announcement that would explain the need for people not to stare at handicapped people. She pleaded with viewers to offer a smile and compassion instead of turning away or grinning.

Pitsch wanted to learn about the person who received the chair from this special girl.

The second chair Pitsch wanted to follow was used by 18-year-old Larry Bredow, a quadriplegic who was physically and mentally handicapped.

His parents Kelsey and Larry Bredow, of Clinton Township, were sent by their church as missionaries to help fit the recipients in the chairs collected by WFTW. They met at Pitsch's house recently to talk about how devastatingly poor Ghana was and how the wheelchairs transformed the lives of the recipients.

"They have nothing physically, but I think God is more pleased with them than with us who have so much," Kelsey Bredow explained.

She talked about the dilapidated, tiny homes where the nationals lived; the common use of outhouses; and how running water was considered a luxury.

"Still, they were a very happy, gracious people," Larry Bredow said.

The Bredows also helped handpick the two nationals who would receive the chairs Pitsch wanted to follow.

Alex's chair went to the director of the Ghana Society for the Physically Disabled, who despite paralyzed legs travels from village to village working tirelessly with handicapped people. The wheelchair he had been using was old, worn out, large and not collapsible, which meant he had to tie it to the roof of the rundown car he used.

"He was such a noble, regal man and very gracious," Kelsey Bredow said. "We knew that he was so deserving of that chair and he could do so much good with it."

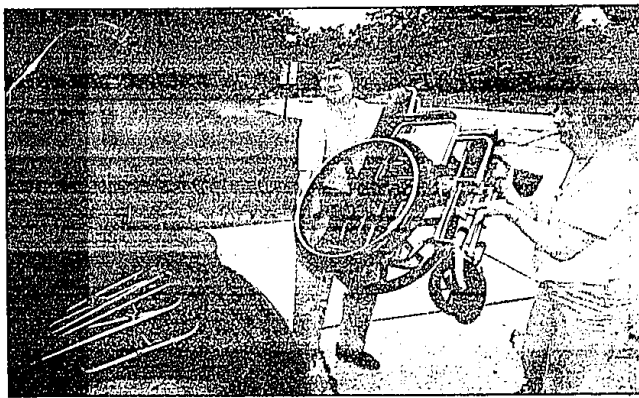
Larry Bredow's chair went to a man named Patrick, who crawled on his hands and knees to get around.

Patrick, 22, quit school in the seventh grade because he was getting too large for his parents to carry. Through an interpreter, he told the Bredows that he planned to return to school and possibly become a teacher.

Patrick's upper body was strong, but his legs were like two twigs with sores on his knees from being dragged on the ground. The Bredows gave Patrick a picture of their "Little Larry."

Delivering their son's wheelchair was an important gesture for the Bredows. It was another example of how their Larry's life had meaning even though while he was alive he was helpless.

Yet, throughout his life, Kelsey said, they saw how God used him to teach them about true love;



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BROWER

And more: Dorothy Pitsch of Farmington Hills gets help from Jan Glovak, who worked with Pitsch on a six-month drive to gather wheelchairs for the rest of the world.

the generosity and kindness of people and so many other important lessons.

The Bredows said living in Ghana for a week and a half was a life-changing experience that taught them firsthand how truly poor these people are and their tremendous gratitude for the smallest gestures of kindness.

Three wheelchairs went to a hospital that Kelsey Bredow described as being like a leftover from World War I with patients lying on the floor. These were the first wheelchairs the hospital had.

When WFTW arrived they were greeted by the nationals who had been waiting for hours. The cost of a wheelchair to these people would have been the equivalent of 10 years' salary, Kelsey Bredow said.

"I was overwhelmed with what these poor people don't have and that these wheelchairs are a luxury," said Glovak, a Farmington Hills resident who was among those gathered at Pitsch's house to hear the Bredows' account of their missionary work.

"For us to get these chairs that are castaways ... how very rewarding to see someone in such need is receiving such a valuable gift," Glovak said. "What this really shows us is that this is something that we can't let go. We have to have another drive for another country."

Pitsch and Glovak are planning another drive next year. They have been accepting wheelchairs ever since the last drive ended in spring. Call Pitsch at (248)661-3317 or Glovak at (248)661-0964.



Appreciative: Maxwell Boachie who works with the Ghana Society for the Physically Disabled was presented his wheelchair by Larry and Kelsey Bredow. Maxwell's old, tattered wheelchair was too small for him.



His first: Patrick Afriyie in Ghana, West Africa, is presented his first-ever wheelchair from Larry and Kelsey Bredow. Patrick quit school because he lacked the mobility to continue attending.

Helmets from page A1

City Council passed the measure in a 5-2 vote with Cheryl Oliveira and Vicki Barnett dissenting.

With Igrisan filing a petition of intent, the ordinance had been placed on hold until Thursday's deadline.

Had the group had the required signatures, the ordinance would've ended up as a

referendum on the Nov. 2 ballot.

To get 4,300 signatures in a 45-day period is difficult but not impossible, Igrisan said. He said his group averaged 10-12 signatures an hour.

To be successful, petitioners would have needed to gather 100 signatures a day.

"That's a lot," Igrisan said.

A charter amendment on Nov. 2 ballot proposes to lower the required number of signatures needed, which is based on percentage of voter turnout in the previous general election.

If approved, 10 percent of the electorate would be required to sign to repeal an ordinance instead of 15 percent.

Safe from page A1

who then pointed a small automatic pistol at her. He got into the backseat.

Another man then grabbed her car keys and got behind the wheel. As the Lexus drove north in the lot, the woman plotted her escape through an unlocked rear door, she told police.

When she started to open the latch, the carjacker pushed her out onto the pavement. The car went out of the lot and west on Nine Mile.

Farmington Hills police spot-

ted the Lexus unoccupied at Farmington Manor Apartments, off Shinwassee. They brought in a West Bloomfield K-9 unit to search the area.

With the saturation of police cars, the thieves may have panicked, Dwyer said. Investigators are not ruling out that the robbers live in the area.

"It was probably a crime of opportunity," Dwyer said.

A search dog followed a trail that led from the apartment complex to Nantucket Condo-

miniums. The scent stopped at a fence next to Holiday Chevrolet, police reports said.

The carjacker who pushed the woman into the car is described as a thinly built black male in his 20s. He was wearing a gray tank top and blue shorts.

The driver is also a thinly built black male in his 20s. He was wearing a tan-colored T-shirt.

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