Student collects 10,000 shoes in 18 months to give to those in need

Prateek Bhola owns a lot of shoes. "I've been a cross-country runner all my life, and because of that I've had to change my shoes often," said Prateek, a 16-year-old junior at Novi High School. "Most of the shoes were in great condition – in a lot of cases, I had simply outgrown them. So I tried to find a way to donate them ... and I wanted to see if I could do it in a way that would have a global impact."

His research led him to partner with Soles4Souls, a non-profit organization that provides new and gently used shoes to children around the world. It was August of 2015, he was just about to start his freshman year at Novi High School, and his goal was to collect 10,000 shoes in four years.

It took him 18 months to reach his goal.

"It started out word-of-mouth and spread really quickly," he said, looking back on his collection drive. "I first created a flier that I passed around to local businesses and religious organizations. Then I managed to get some publicity in some community newsletters. It just kept growing."

Everyone wanted to help out. The Running Fit sporting goods store on Haggerty Road set up a collection box and managed to collect hundreds of shoes. The Holy Family Clothes Closet in Novi set up a collection box, and so did the Muslim Community of Western Suburbs in Canton. Even the Montessori School in Novi where Prateek attended kindergarten donated shoes to the cause.

"They still remember me," Prateek said matter-of-factly.

If there was a world record for collecting shoes in the fastest time, the Bharatiya Temple in Troy would win it hands down: the Hindu temple managed to collect over 800 pairs of shoes in just under three hours.

Follow Your Dream

Ann Gayton, a longtime volunteer at the Holy Family Clothes Closet, wasn't surprised at how quickly Prateek reached his goal.

"The people of Novi are very generous, and Prateek seemed quite eager and organized," she said. "I know his mom, and she told me how he had everything sorted out and boxed up neatly in their garage."

The Clothes Closet serves over 500 families in the area, helping to provide them with donated clothes and furniture and miscellaneous items. Eligible families set up appointments to "shop" there every three months.

"Everything is free," Gayton said. "Anyone with a low income can shop here - we don't care who you are or where..."
you live. We have all these wonderful families who are trying to make ends meet - they have the need and we have the goods. You might say it's a match made in heaven!"

As for young people interested in charity work, Gayton suggests they follow in Prateek’s footsteps.

"If you have a passion for what you're doing, you do it much more effectively," she said. "It might be that you'd like to mentor or tutor someone. Perhaps start a collection drive for coats and shoes - or maybe it's just a matter of just volunteering regularly. One thing's for sure - the opportunity is there."

**Stacks of Shoes**

Prateek would stack the donated shoes in the family garage, and his parents would drive him to one of the nearby distribution centers whenever he reached 300-400 pairs. One time, when he had over 1,000 pairs of shoes in the garage, a local business working with Soles4Souls sent out a truck to pick them up.

Not every shoe was a perfect fit.

"We did a shoe collection at the Novi Civic Center and someone gave us a walking boot that you'd wear if you broke your leg," Prateek said with a smile. "One boot and that was it."

Another person donated a pair of ice skates.

Prateek credits his family and friends with helping him reach his goal. He said it gives him a good feeling knowing he helped provide thousands of pairs of shoes to a lot of kids who aren’t as fortunate.

Where do the shoes go? Prateek said they’re distributed around the world: Haiti is a big recipient, along with several countries in Africa and parts of India. Many of the shoes stay in the U.S.

As for his future plans, Prateek said he’d eventually like to go into a business where he could support social causes. He talked about a solution to world hunger, or even helping out with Soles4Souls on another collection drive.

For now, he’s enjoying being a teenager and a student at Novi High School. In other words, he’s taking life one step at a time.