

Thank heaven for HOPE Volunteers prove Canadians want to share

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WE are caught in a stormy sea of prattle.

Waves of useless words wash over us, coming from pundits, preachers, think-tanks, politicians, bloggers, social activists, business people and others. Struggling through this piffle makes you wonder if anyone is not just yammering, but actually doing something.

Wonder no more. Val McIntyre and the 70 volunteers at Winnipeg's International HOPE are getting impressive results. They collect redundant medical and surgical supplies and equipment from around Manitoba and distribute them to carefully selected partners in impoverished and developing countries.

Tagging along with McIntyre as she trots through HOPE's huge warehouse in the St. James big-box district, you get an idea of the organization's scope. You pass a long row of pallets piled high with neatly labelled boxes of everything from bandages to vitamins. Around a corner, there's a fleet of wheelchairs, a small forest of wooden crutches, more hospital beds than I've ever seen before in one place and some complicated medical equipment.

All the goods have been or will be sorted, cleaned and, if necessary, repaired.

But the warehouse, as impressive as it is, is not the real story of HOPE. We have HOPE because of a network possible only in a friendly, multicultural society such as Manitoba.

Hutterite women upholster wheelchair arm rests and make blankets; the Ukrainian Professional and Business Club of Winnipeg raises money to pay distribution costs; the Joe Brain Foundation, set up by a feisty, successful Flin Flon prospector, donates funds; Ang'er Deng Ruay takes supplies to her home village in Sudan; the honorary counsel for Jamaica helps look after three hospitals in that Caribbean nation; a doctor assists a Ugandan hospital where she used to work; private sponsors help get supplies to Nigeria.

Manitoba businesses also play a key role. The warehouse, which is critical to HOPE's operations, has been donated by a successful businessman, who doesn't want his name used. Four trucking companies, which also want anonymity, have shipped containers of supplies to Toronto to connect with overseas flights.

HOPE shows us that Canadians want to share. It's their governments that can't get a handle on international aid.



Certainly, the governments are rich enough. In the fiscal year ended this March, the combined surplus for all levels of government, plus the Canada and Quebec pension plans, hit \$29 billion. That's a billion higher than the year before, and a level that has only been reached twice in the past two decades.

Canada's net worth reached an all-time high of \$4.9 trillion earlier this year, or \$150,500 for every man, woman and child.

Yet, our governments can't seem to run proper aid programs. We still haven't hit the aid levels suggested by Lester Pearson when he was prime minister.

Either Paul Martin's Liberals or Stephen Harper's Conservatives (depending on whom you believe) cut \$700 million out of Canada's \$2.8 billion 2008-09 African aid budget. The federal Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has been castigated for ineffective aid to Africa. And now we learn that the mad world of Ottawa has decided to give \$7.7 million in aid to the Irish, who have a higher per-capita GDP than Canadians.

By contrast, HOPE is careful about how it ships material overseas. It uses three methods.

One method: Volunteers simply take a box or suitcase of medical supplies when they are travelling to a country. Even with this simple method, however, problems crop up.

A Ukrainian official asked Val's husband, Don, what he had in his hockey bag. "Drugs for the people of this nation," Don happily announced.

Not a good response. Drugs start government alarm bells ringing. For that reason, HOPE doesn't handle them. Don should have said he had medical supplies. The incident was resolved with the help of officials who had come to the airport to accept the shipment.

Another distribution technique: Volunteers spend six hours loading a 40-foot-long container, which is trucked to Toronto. HOPE wants to ship out 10 containers this year.

Finally, HOPE puts medical supplies into some of the 350 containers shipped overseas each year by the Roman Catholic Church's Canadian Food for Children to 45 developing countries.

McIntyre says HOPE spends a lot of time making sure the recipients of the supplies are honest, responsible and will use the material properly. "Unless you're careful," she says, "medical supplies can end up on the black market in an instant." HOPE also asks recipients for an accounting of how the material was used.

HOPE was started in 1995 by Phyllis Reader, an operating room nurse at St. Boniface Hospital, who felt surplus supplies shouldn't just be dumped in landfills. HOPE was born when she teamed up with a Canadian nurse working in Malawi and arranged for a few boxes of supplies to be sent to that nation.

As I was leaving HOPE, I noticed, just steps away from the warehouse's door, a man in a large truck tossing loaves of bread into a dumpster. I got this hopeless feeling that some of our talk about becoming green and using materials wisely is just more prattle.

I think, however, we can believe in HOPE.

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