

Our Town

Hey Sole Sister

Caryn Barry has collected more than 19,000 pairs of shoes for charity



PRSR STD
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit #827
Gainesville, FL



GARDENS FROM GARBAGE

Compost network diverts food scraps away from the landfill

PAWS ON PAROLE

Giving dogs and inmates alike a new "leash" on life

ECRWSS
POSTAL PATRON

Sole Sister

19,000 Pairs of Shoes for Charity

BY COURTNEY LINDWALL

Caryn Barry collects shoes. She has faded, brown Converse and stilettos with sequined straps. She has black Nike sneakers with bold, red swoops and high heels with small, beaded flowers. Barry collected more than 19,000 pairs of shoes — and then she shipped them away.

Barry, a sophomore at the University of Florida, runs a nonprofit organization called A Walk In My Shoes Inc., frequently

abbreviated “AWIMS.” Its mission is to collect gently worn shoes from the community and send them to Haitians in need.

Although the organization began during Barry’s freshman year at DeLand High School, its recent expansion to Gainesville and its plans for this upcoming year have Barry and other organization members excited for AWIMS’ future.

When Barry became a student at UF in 2011, she brought her passion with her.

AWIMS currently has two

PHOTO BY COURTNEY LINDWALL

Caryn Barry, now a business major at UF, runs a nonprofit organization called A Walk In My Shoes Inc. Its mission is to collect gently worn shoes from the community and send them to Haitians in need.







PHOTO BY COURTNEY LINDWALL

Spread out on Caryn Barry's lawn, a pile of shoes represents the foundation for what her organization does: collect and donate.

drop-boxes in Gainesville, which serve as the backbone of the organization. It participated in charity events, such as the popular Beer Run 5K. And it also increased its focus on community participation.

Because members are not able to make trips to Haiti very often, Barry said she wants the organization to inspire and change the local community, as well.

"I'm writing curriculum to teach middle school and high school kids

about the nonprofit sector," Barry said. "It's all about community empowerment."

She wants to show children that doing big things at a young age is possible.

"Everyone can do this," she said. "If you feel passionate about something, it doesn't matter how old you are."

Barry first got the idea to send shoes to Haiti after a typical closet clean-out in 2007, when she was a

freshman in high school. Instead of sending the unwanted shoes to a local charity center, Barry wanted to do something bigger.

She became interested in the Caribbean nation of Haiti as a possible location to send her donation. In 2007, Haiti had yet to become the epicenter of humanitarian aid that it is today. It would be years until the 7.0-magnitude earthquake hit — changing the island and its people forever.

Soon, Barry's congregation became involved. Donated shoes piled up and the project took on its own name: A Walk In My Shoes.

Barry finally traveled to Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, in January 2009. Her closet clean-out had turned into 1,500 pairs of shoes,



POOL CONSTRUCTION • RE-SURFACE • DESIGN • MAINTENANCE

A beautiful tropical oasis...



LIC.# CPC1457976

352-494-5986

www.H2OasisPool.com

dozens of hours packaging and a ton of commitment to the cause.

When she finally saw the levels of poverty up close during her travels, it turned a one-time project into a full-time passion.

"I couldn't not do this," Barry said.

When speaking of that first pivotal trip, she recalled Haiti's rocky land, which children would frequently walk up and down to retrieve water. She recalled the 10-by-8-foot tents used as homes. And she recalled the Haitian man who handed her his niece, hoping she could bring the little girl to America for a better life.

Most importantly, she recalled a lot of feet without shoes.

Barry came home to DeBary, Fla., and went to work. The group of volunteers grew. There were benefit concerts at local restaurants. AWIMS bumper stickers multiplied — plastered on binders, cars and bulletin boards all around town. The group returned to Haiti in March 2010. But most of all, the number of donated

"They don't have much, but what they do have is family and social connections on a very deep level."

shoes just continued to go up.

A turning point for the organization was the first benefit concert held at the First Baptist Church of DeLand. The acts were just local children playing guitars or singing choir songs. About 100 guests piled into the church's gymnasium to watch and enjoy. It was a modest event — but Barry felt a sense of excitement and purpose from the community that she had not seen before.

"That was the first time I witnessed people getting excited about serving."

About a quarter of the way into the show, coordinators were rushing to get more chairs for guests who could not find an empty spot. At the bake sale, someone donated \$20 for

a single cookie. And afterward, all of the audience members who had stayed until the end helped to clean up.

"After that, we had a name," Barry said. "We were a group of people working for this."

Christian Jones, a 19-year-old University of Central Florida student, became a part of AWIMS during this time. Jones ran the sound for benefit concerts and helped the group prepare shoes for shipping. He also went along on the AWIMS trip in March of 2010, describing it as one of the best weeks of his life. He gained a deep respect for the Haitian people, he said.

"They don't have much, but what they do have is family and social connections on a very deep level,"

DECKING • LANDSCAPING • ENERGY EFFICIENT SYSTEMS • REPAIRS

...in your own back yard!

Whether you're looking to build new or just keep your current pool sparkling, we can help. Look to us for prompt, professional service at a reasonable price. *Call today!*



Jones said. "They have such a joy to serve and help others."

This trip occurred only a few months after the devastating earthquake, which brought Haiti into the international spotlight. The news was especially difficult to hear, Barry said, because she had fallen in love with the people and the country. AWIMS continued to focus on providing shoes for the Haitians after the disaster, she said.

Jones is now on the AWIMS board of directors and helps out primarily with advertising and the website. Although many of the organization's most involved members are now spread out around Florida, they maintain a tight connection and a focused vision for the organization's future.

Being dispersed gives the group "an even better opportunity to spread AWIMS to more cities," Jones said.

This will bring in more shoes as well as more volunteers. The group is always looking for people to help clean, package and label shoes for shipment, Jones said.

Aleah Lodge, an involved member and Florida State University freshman, said that AWIMS helps her to see all that people have to give.

"We really do have so much to spare here," Lodge said.

The organization accepts almost any kind of shoe, except winter boots or shoes with holes. Barry said that the Haitians are appreciative for all types of shoes and love trying them all on.

"They like the high heels, too," she said, "even if it's just for playing dress up." ■

DROP BOX LOCATIONS:

Target Copy
3422 SW Archer Rd.

Renaissance Printing
4130 NW 16th Blvd.

For more information,
visit awimshoes.com

