

Good News for Kids Gainesville-Based Organization

Weaves Webs of Warmth around the World

One-Year
Anniversary Issue

By her own admission, Madeline Austin is not engaged in the typical pursuits associated with medicine. She's not researching cancer or curing diseases; neither is she involved with legislative issues specific to the future of medicine. But what the Shands at UF artist-in-residence *is* doing, is sending warmth, love, and other intangible aspects of healing to children in need around the world. Dollies without Borders, an organization founded by the artist in 2006, is devoted to 'building community' and 'speaking the universal language of the art of the heart,' according to its promotional materials.

The Gainesville-based charity makes dolls and stuffed animals to be distributed to children when doctors and medical students travel overseas on medical missions trips. The handmade creations are personally delivered by Austin, her friends, and others to impoverished children throughout the world. More than 1,000 items have been distributed since the program's inception.

"The major criteria is that the color of fabric used to make the doll body must match the ethnicity of the child," Austin said. She is careful to account for cultural expectations as well; when working with the Middle East Children's Alliance (MECA), for instance, she created camels instead of dolls. The organization is additionally linked to charities such as Art Aids Art and AIM Africa, which benefit children.

Shands at UF artist-in-residence Madeline Austin started the Dollies without Borders organization in 2006. Since its inception, more than 1,000 dolls and stuffed animals have been distributed to deserving children around the world.



The idea came to her after volunteering in Tanzania, where she taught doll making at the Imbaseni free library. She also taught sewing at the Good Hope Orphanage and thought of the idea for Dollies without Borders while on the flight home.

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"The children had nothing, and the doll making and the dolls were so celebrated it just fit," Austin said. The first doll gifting was in Nairobi, Kenya, at the Mater Hospital where Austin and her colleague Rusti Brandman worked to help start an Arts in Medicine program. She then returned to Tanzania to deliver the remainder of the dolls to children in the Good Hope Orphanage and to teach more doll making. Since then she and her sewing circle have sent dolls to The Gambia, Rwanda, Mexico, India, Thailand, and parts of Central and South America as well as the middle east.

"[Creating the dolls] does something else," Austin said. "It turns into this wonderful afternoon of just being there for each other...the conversation just flows; it flows into a special depth that we often don't have time for in our daily lives."

"We've received a slew of thank-you letters, including handwritten notes from children in Rwanda about their dolls," said Jill Sonke, Associate Director of Shands' Arts in Medicine program and Director of the UF Center for the Arts in Health Care. Sonke said that on the first Monday of every month, Shands patients may participate in creating elephants.

Charlie's Corner, in Room 5502 of the hospital, also hosts families and friends of the patients who are making the dolls.

Austin opens her home the first Saturday of every month for local volunteers to come and make the dolls. Some of the participants have never sewn before, and as they are learning and creating they, too, are touched by the notion that love and human kindness can be integral in health care and healing. "[Creating the dolls] does something else," Austin said. "It turns into this wonderful afternoon of just being there for each other...the conversation just flows; it flows into a special depth that we often don't have time for in our daily lives."

She has, in essence, created her own world wide web, with women in Nova Scotia, St. Petersburg, and parts of California creating dolls to send around the world as part of the mission of Dollies without Borders. "The sewing circle has a sort of spider web effect, because the dolls are being made all over and they're going all over," Austin explained.

Her outreach has been the subject of a video documentary by Bridget Fitzgerald and Wendy Chambers, available on current.com. As the organization grows and continues to reach more and more children, Austin would like to work more closely with UF organizations who are planning trips overseas so that even more of the dolls can reach children. For more information on the organization, visit www.dollieswithoutborders.com.

Bridget Fitzgerald, co-creator of documentary film on the Dollies without Borders, attended the spring diversity fair at Shands at UF where the organization featured its handmade creations which are distributed around the world.

