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Pencils led to books, and books to schools; A Canadian's gift of school supplies prompted him to 'empower' Nicaraguan children through education

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Illustrations: Photo: Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen / Almonte's Tom Affleck founded a charity called SchoolBox, which has handed out thousands of school supplies to children and has helped build a school and library in Nicaragua. 'We've touched thousands of people,' he says, thanking in particular his generous Canadian donors.

It's 5:30 a.m. and already the heat is starting to climb towards a 35C afternoon. Three children race through Tom Affleck's tiny bedroom, headed to the cold-water bathroom.

Roosters are making a ruckus. He tries to stay in bed until 7 a.m.

You can drive around Big Corn Island, off Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, in 10 minutes. Everywhere you can still see devastation that Hurricane Mitch left behind -- in 1988.

In the house where his host, Hayward Campbell, looks after three grandchildren, breakfast will be rice, beans, the starchy banana-like plantain, and maybe an egg to fuel a morning of digging and carrying cement blocks to rebuild the San Santiago school on the island.

Tom works with his own team of little helpers: "They can carry over handfuls of sand while we're carrying buckets, so they can say 'I helped build the school I go to'."

Between five and 10 volunteers a day -- mostly locals, but periodically Canadians -- built the school in a few months last year.

But before the day's work starts, he takes 15 minutes to pray, sit quietly and read the Bible. "Meditative time of prayer and preparation for the day -- if I don't do that, generally the day doesn't go very well."

He knows all about how things can go wonderfully well. And devastatingly poorly. And how fast the switch.

Tom, 30, who grew up between Pakenham and Almonte, just west of Ottawa, graduated from Guelph University in 2002 with a degree in international development. As a Canadian International Development Agency intern in Peru, he eventually became project manager on a "very dynamic" U.S. aid project in the Amazon region.

Working with 250 rice farmers, he says, "I felt I was really able to have an impact." Under the micro-credit project, farmers increased yields by 30 per cent and had a 98 per cent loan payback rate.

Next he worked on a project, funded by CIDA, with

the Mennonite Economic Development Associates in Nicaragua. He spent his days isolated at a computer, working on software to document farm production. Overwhelmed with a sense of failure and futility, he crashed.

"I dropped 40 pounds in two years," he says, probably caused by parasite-laden water and by street food he had freely consumed, and by too-little hand-washing.

All this was magnified by emotional upheaval. "I have great expectations of myself. I want to try to do things to make a tangible difference."

He resigned and returned home before Christmas 2005. But he couldn't stay away. He was back in two months.

Still emotionally and physically flattened, he threw himself into projects -- a roof on a widow's house, work with street children, agricultural training, and bringing food to the women's prison where meals are not supplied.

"I was very broken. I was a big believer in me and this whole process scraped away the ego, the conventional ideas of success in our society. And at that time, I understood what the love of God means. I went back on this quest of sharing that."

His goal? "To empower individuals to reach their potential to give them that lift up, to run the rest of the race."

One pivotal day, he was visiting a family being persecuted by a large coffee farm trying to take their land. On a whim, he'd brought notebooks and pencils for the kids.

"I gave them to one little girl. Her dad came around the corner. His face lit up into a big smile.

"Now that you have a notebook and a pencil," the beaming man said to his little daughter, "you can go to school this year." In many countries, children can only attend school if they have supplies.

Says Tom: "Imagine -- this little nine-year-old beautiful girl, full of potential, and she wasn't going to learn how to read and write because she didn't have a notebook and a pencil."

It was a stunning moment. "I'd lost my money, my health. It all needed to happen. There was nothing left. All I was trying to do was help somebody.

"So when I gave that little girl a notebook and pencil that cost me \$1, it was like night and day."

The idea for SchoolBOX (SchoolBox.ca) began right then.

He started handing out pencils and notebooks -- door to door, on buses, in schools in Managua, Nicaragua's capital.

Using about \$2,000 in savings and his credit, he bought supplies from a store in the slum. Its enthusiastic owners made up little packages in clear plastic enclosing two lined notebooks, two pencils, a ruler, a pencil sharpener and an eraser -- all tied together with a colourful ribbon -- for \$2.

"I put them right into each kid's hands, which avoids all corruption."

"Ron Chavarria Arauz lived in the slums of Managua and worked as a driver for (the Mennonite Economic Development Associates). He became my friend, took me into his house, shared his family's food." Tom slept on a blanket on the floor for months as they worked on this project.

In 2007, he and Ron handed out 1,500 packages. He ran out of money. But pencils led to books and the books led to schools. And they all brought donors and volunteers to the projects.

He's gathered books, cash donations and volunteers in Canada -- especially in the Almonte, Carleton Place, Pakenham region. Some worked on the Corn Island school. Volunteers from Calgary, Vancouver and northern B.C. helped build a second school on Ometepe Island in the middle of a lake in central Nicaragua.

SchoolBOX's Canadian office is located in space donated by St. Paul's Anglican Church in Almonte. Almonte District High School students joined other area schools and volunteers to raise cash to build and equip the school. And collectively they gathered 5,000 books for the Blaney Library in the Corn Island school.

The kids on the island "are in love with the library," says Tom. "These children understand the privilege of a book. They don't want to leave. They hide behind bookcases to read. They are so in love with the opportunity to learn."

In 2007 SchoolBOX donations totaled \$8,633; in 2008, they jumped to \$150,000 which went to 3,409 children in 26 communities.

"We've touched thousands of people," he says, with his blend of enthusiasm and gratitude. "The list of Canadian donors goes on for pages.

"After two years," he says, "the only think I can think of is: What isn't possible?"

Next week: The Garbage Dump School and the SchoolBOX home team

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