



— Evening News photo by KIM BRENT

Kathy Briggs (right) jokes with Maxine Demski as they sew Monday. When Ms. Briggs learned of an area project that is collecting dresses to be sent to Africa so that girls can attend school, she presented the idea of contributing to her fellow Circle of Friends Quilt members. The women spent their monthly meeting time Monday at the Frenchtown-Dixie Branch Library churning out the dresses. Ms. Briggs already has 20 done and has set a goal of completing 100 dresses to contribute to the Little Dresses for Africa project.

Dressed with hope

When a Brownstown Township woman found out African girls need dresses for school, she started collecting them. When a local sewing group heard about that effort, they got busy behind their machines

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Kathy Briggs has a granddaughter. "I couldn't imagine her not having a dress," she said.

When she heard about girls in Africa not having dresses to wear to school, she decided to act. Monday, her sewing group at the Frenchtown-Dixie Branch Library used its time to help make dresses for the nonprofit Little Dresses for Africa group. They sewed for several hours and the dresses they make will get into the hands this summer of girls from Malawi and other African countries.

The organization was the brainchild of Brownstown Township resident Rachel O'Neill. She founded the group after a mission trip to Africa in which she found so many young girls without dresses to wear.

The response, she says, has been overwhelming.

"Our goal was 1,000 dresses," she said. "We have more like 3,500. There hasn't been a single day in the last month that I didn't get at least one package on my porch.

"We have 14 states that are sewing. It's unbelievable. People are so nice. It's spreading across the country. Maine, Wisconsin, Las Vegas, California. We have a big group in Kentucky. I got a package from Texas two days ago. It's crazy."

The dresses are distributed through orphanages in central Africa. First it was girls in Malawi and it is spreading to other African nations as well, such as Uganda.

"I've been contacted by other countries from Africa," Mrs. O'Neill said.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Little Dresses for Africa is a non-profit, Christian-based organization that aims to provide relief to the children of central Africa. Dresses made out of pillow cases are distributed through the orphanages for girls in that region.

For more information, visit www.littledressesforafrica.org.

Groups like the one Mrs. Briggs helped organize just seem to pop up, Mrs. O'Neill said.

"I think people miss getting together," she said. "They miss the camaraderie and sharing one goal. I think this answers that for a community."

Nine members of The Circle of Friends Quilt members, as Mrs. Briggs' group calls itself, made about 40 dresses Monday afternoon and started 40 more. The pattern Mrs. O'Neill recommends is making the dresses out of pillowcases. It's a simple pattern that was found on the Internet.

"The minute we said pillowcases, it just took off," Mrs. O'Neill said. "It's so easy. Anybody can do it."

Mrs. O'Neill will return to Africa for a third time in June and will take with her the latest shipment of dresses. The organization has had such a large response, she is planning to branch out from just dresses to scholarships and other monetary aid. She said people might talk about negative things in society, but she doesn't see it.

"It is amazing how nice people are," she said. "If the dresses keep coming in, I'm going to keep sending them. It sure makes a difference. It gives these girls hope."