

## Seniors group puts smiles on kids? faces around the world ? one stitch at a time



**By Brock Weir**

There are few kids in the world for which the sight of a needle isn't a cause for a groan or a grimace, but the needles of 'Sew Much Fun', the sewing circle of the Aurora Seniors' Centre are soon to help put smiles on the faces of many children living in the developing world.

The women in Sew Much Fun had a good reason to smile themselves last Friday as, through Operation Smile, they bundled up numerous hand-sewn hospital gowns, dolls, and arm bands for kids born with cleft lips and palates in Central and South America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East through Operation Smile.

Operation Smile was founded in the mid-1980s to coordinate and mobilize doctors with an aim of providing free surgeries to reduce and repair cleft lips and palates of children worldwide. Since its inception, the Virginia-based non-profit has provided nearly 300,000 free surgeries for people born with various facial deformities which, if left untreated, can cause innumerable health and social consequences.

'Anything for children really touches my heart,' explains Joan Levert, coordinator of Sew Much Fun. 'We have made 50 hospital gowns, 100 arm bands, and 52 bands in which Operation Smile normally puts a mirror in for patients to see their new smiles, as well as colouring books, crayons, and any hygiene items they need to take home.'

The Seniors' sewing group was first connected with Operation Smile through the charity's local coordinator Maureen Atcheson over two years ago. Since then, as long as they have enough cotton, cloth and supplies on hand, all made available through donations to the group or purchased through funds raised through the sales of their own hand-made items, their fingers and needles are busy making smiles, one stitch at a time.

While doctors from around the world provide the surgeries free of charge, they can't do their work in their makeshift clinics without most of their supplies coming in from elsewhere. This goes well beyond the typical items used in surgery, but these hand-made hospital gowns for each patient, the hand-made dolls so doctors can demonstrate to the kids exactly what the procedure is like and how things like the anaesthetic mask will be used, and arm bands, which are reinforced with tongue depressors to keep kids from bending their arms to poke at their stitches.

'I see this as an ongoing thing,' said Ms. Levert. 'As long as we have the material, we'll keep these kids smiling because they are often ostracized from their community. They have to stay indoors, they can't play with other kids, and it is one of these things where they can have a lot of pre-notions that it is catching, so they don't want their children to catch it. And that is, of course, not the case. It gives these kids a normal chance at life.'

Ms. Atcheson coordinates many projects across York Region that help Operation Smile. She first became involved with the group

when she saw a commercial on television promoting their work. It was almost like a watershed moment for her, she says, and she thought "the Lord wants me to be involved in this."

She quickly went on their website and picked up the phone to become involved and she hasn't looked back.

"Joan was excellent and got everyone involved," says Ms. Atcheson of Sew Much Fun. "I am a teacher and children touch my heart. I just wept and felt so deeply for what was going on with these children. I was so concerned with what was going on with these poor kids who are shunned by society and miserable and thought if I could do something to help them, I would do something."

"These children are separated from their village, they are not allowed to take part in anything, the kids ridicule them, they are shunned, they have to wear a paper bag on their head because people say it makes them sick to look at them, so the children are just in misery. Most of them stay home all the time, don't go anywhere, don't do anything and have no friends. [Operation Smile] really changes their lives: they can go to school, they have friends, and the transformation is amazing to see before and after. These doctors are doing amazing things."

For more on Operation Smile, visit [www.operationsmile.org](http://www.operationsmile.org). For local initiatives and donations, and sewing patterns, contact Ms. Atcheson at [maureen.atcheson@yahoo.ca](mailto:maureen.atcheson@yahoo.ca) or 905-836-8981.