

It's really opened my eyes to the needs of others

Ali Henderson meets the people behind Dress A Girl Around The World, a charity that believes every girl should have at least one dress.

TEN years ago Rachel Eggum Cinader of Forest City, Iowa, was a busy carer to adults with learning difficulties. She never envisaged that she would start up a charity.

"I was already involved with the charity my brother founded, Hope 4 Women International, and we started an organisation called Women in Business in Uganda," Rachel explains. "Somebody gave us the idea of teaching these women to make dresses out of pillowcases. We did that, then other people wanted to make dresses for little girls." Fifty dresses were sent to an orphanage in Honduras.

"When these pictures came back, I said, 'I guess we're Dress A Girl Around The World!'"

"I threw up this website and I always say God took over from there, because I had no idea that the website was going to spread around the world."

The charity celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, and has created 1.5 million dresses for girls in 80 countries. The charity is staffed by volunteers.

"Over the years we've had people contact us, and we have volunteers all over the world. In the USA they can send dresses to ambassadors from their state or a state nearby."

"Each dress is made full of love and care"

Vanessa Campos is ambassador for Dress A Girl Portugal.

"When I lived in the USA, I saw a picture on Facebook of a lady making a dress and thought that was something I'd like to be involved in."

"It can take as little as an hour to make a beautiful dress. Nowadays the project consumes more of my time. Together with Joana Nobre Garcia and Ana Bragança, who are directors of Dress A Girl Portugal, I promote meetings among volunteers to sew dresses. We also make shorts."

"Many elderly volunteers feel that through the charity they can still contribute to society. Each dress is made full of love and care. Over the last three years I've learned so many different things through Dress A Girl. Mainly, I started paying attention to the essential values of life."



One-and-a-half-million dresses have been created.

Ambassadors find groups who are travelling who can transport the dresses to where they are needed."

Rachel has just returned from a Dress A Girl conference in Portugal, where volunteers raise funds and carry the dresses themselves to Mozambique and other Portuguese colonies.

"Vanessa, our ambassador in Portugal, originally lived in Florida. When she moved to Portugal, I asked her if she wanted to start Dress A Girl there. She knew no-one, but mentioned it to a lady she met who owned a craft company in Lisbon."

"She suggested putting out flyers, and on the first night about fifty women were lined up outside the store. Now it's exploded." Rachel's enthusiasm is tangible.

"We see this now all over the world, once people catch on to the vision," she tells me.

"Our mission is to ensure every girl has at least one dress in her lifetime. But while women are carrying out the vision, I hear stories



The dresses donated make the girls feel loved.

How To Help

Visit www.dressagirlaroundtheworld.com to sew a dress for a girl living in poverty.

about how they themselves are being helped by helping others."

I'm touched and amused by the tale of one elderly Portuguese lady.

"She was in her eighties," Rachel reveals. "Her son said she was always calling him to tell him about what she needed and saying how lonely she was."

"Then he didn't hear from her for about two weeks so he paid her a visit and her house was filled with dresses."

"She'd discovered Dress A Girl. Now he says the

only time she calls is when she wants more fabric!"

Anyone can get involved, sewing alone or creating a group.

Rachel explains that by going on to Dress A Girl's website, volunteers can find their nearest ambassador and get clear guidelines on how to create a simple dress.

"We don't use pillowcases any more. We ask for new fabric – you hold your hand behind it to check that you don't see through it. A lot of times, people think, well, they're poor, they'll be

happy with anything.

"That is not our mission. If it's not good enough for your daughter or granddaughter, it's not good enough for a little girl in Africa."

"We also get men who sew dresses," Rachel confides. "I had a men's group when I lived in Arizona and they really made nice dresses. We'd like to see more men involved."

I ask why the focus is on girls rather than boys.

"In my travelling I've found a lot of girls with torn

dresses," Rachel tells me. "With some, the dresses were so shredded you couldn't even distinguish what they were."

"In so many parts of the world, girls are outcasts. The best part is when I get to deliver the dress; a new one gives her dignity."

"It tells her that she's loved, that she's special. Some of these little girls have never been told that before."

Rachel has long since given up her day job to devote herself to the charity.

"Thank heaven for smartphones." She smiles. "If I have to wait for ten minutes or so for an appointment, I get on the phone and answer e-mails or check out things on Facebook. I'm in constant communication with people around the world."

"Being involved has changed me," Rachel says. "It's grown my faith and given me friends all over the world."

"It's opened my eyes to the needs of others. I feel privileged to do this." ■



The Jinya Educational Trust

Every girl loves a new dress!



Sharing a smile.

"It was such a good idea, I offered to take over"

Jacqui Onslow is UK co-ordinator for Dress A Girl.

"I'm a trustee for an educational charity in Uganda and heard about Dress A Girl seven years ago. I asked the then co-ordinator for some dresses to take out to Uganda."

"A couple of years later she gave up and I thought it was such a good idea, I offered to take over."

"When the dresses arrive, I unpack them, count and sort them into sizes. Everything is stored in my spare bedroom. Each time I visit Uganda, I take out a suitcase of dresses. These are then distributed to the orphanages we support."

"It's fantastic to meet some of the people who make the dresses. There really are some incredible people around!"



A new dress gives a girl dignity.