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'This project is about building bridges'

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Staff Writer

Linda Smythe is using artificial limbs to help build a bridge between two nations.

In a service project aimed at promoting friendship in the Arab world, Smythe and other members of Rotary Clubs are collecting used prostheses for amputees in a worn-torn Iraq.

The project, Walking Free, is a way of recycling thousands of dollars worth of artificial limbs into a message of good will, Smythe said.

In a first floor closet of her Gaithersburg home, Smythe stores the sandy-colored feet and metal shins. Four artificial legs--ranging anywhere from \$2,000 to \$20,000 in price--sit stacked together, forgotten by former owners who needed timely replacements. Soon, Smythe hopes, they will belong to a needy Iraqi.

While Smythe spearheads the limb drives for area Rotary Clubs, Physicians for Peace, a nonprofit that provides medical care to needy areas around the world, breaks down the appendages--collecting the valuable metal hinges and joints to create other aids.

The parts will then travel with Physicians for Peace members next year, who plan to train Iraqi technicians and physicians on how to construct and size the appendages per person in a Basra facility, a port city in southeastern Iraq.

"In a country like Iraq, it becomes a literal drain on the economy and a real issue with the family (when a person becomes an amputee)," said Ron Sconyers, a retired U.S. Air Force brigadier general who now is chief executive of Physicians for Peace. "They lose their sense of self worth because they're not able to contribute."

Members estimate there are about 50,000 amputees in Iraq--5,000 in Basra alone--who are waiting for medical aid. Many are women and children who work the fields. Iraq is second only to Afghanistan for the number of unexploded land mines, Sconyers said.

Before the recent war, Sconyers said, the Basra facility made prostheses for about 50 people a month. Now it performs in the single digits. Technicians may have fled or salaries dropped as doctors found themselves at risk against insurgent forces. At its current rate, the facility could treat its patients--who now make up a four-month waiting list--in about 20 years, he added.

Sconyers and Smythe think there are thousands of used prostheses in the United States that could help Physicians for Peace speed up the process.

"I know they're out there, they're in sheds and closets. People don't know what to do with them," Smythe said. "They're an expensive item and people tend not to throw them away."

Prostheses are illegal to re-sell in the United States because of liability issues.

"They become landfill here," Smythe added.



David S. Spence/The Gazette
Linda Smythe, with son Harry, are collecting used prostheses for amputees in a worn-torn Iraq.

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At a recent Physicians for Peace limb drive in Virginia, about \$150,000 worth of limbs were collected in two hours, Sconyers said.

Smythe and the Montgomery Village Rotary Club have collected four.

Smythe initiated the project through Rotary International in April. About 10 local clubs are currently involved, although she hopes to spread the word on a national level. They have also raised about \$100,000 to help pay for travel, supplies and equipment.

Harry, Smythe's son, is also organizing limb drives and passing out flyers as part of his Eagle Scout project.

"These are people with families trying to live their lives in a good way," Smythe said. "This project is about building bridges."

As the effort progresses, it has attracted acknowledgement from government figures.

"(The project is) an inspiring and important initiative...(that will) not only fill an urgent and essential medical requirement...but will also demonstrate on a people-to-people level that you have voluntarily and selflessly reached out to (the Iraqi people) in friendship," wrote Iraqi Ambassador Rend Al-Rahim to Smythe during the summer.

Although this is the first time the group has targeted Iraq, Physicians for Peace started the Walking Free project about four years ago to aid amputees in Turkey and the Dominican Republic.

Zach Harvey, a prosthetist at Hanger Orthopedics in Bethesda and a Physicians for Peace volunteer, returned from his first trip to the Dominican Republic last week.

Lines of amputees filled the clinic Harvey worked in for seven days, sporting homemade remedies, like wooded feet, on stumps that at one time were appendages.

"They would get there in the morning and wait all day," he said. "And then come back the next day."

Adults tend to need new prosthetic pieces every two to five years, while children change every three to six months.


"It's a problem that won't go away, especially in these kinds of (developing) nations," Harvey said.

It's especially fitting to take the project to Iraq, Smythe added, where thousands of civilians are missing limbs from the recent war.

As the New Year rolls around, Sconyers hopes to send a team of Physicians for Peace members to train Iraqi technicians. Insurgent forces have made it too dangerous to go to Basra, and the group is anticipating training in a neighboring country, like Jordan, he said.

As Walking Free begins in Iraq, the service project at home won't die, Smythe said. She and other clubs will continue to collect limbs for a nation she hopes will embrace American help and good will.


"Right now we're touching only Basra," she said, bending an artificial leg at the knee. "(More donated artificial limbs) won't go to waste."



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