

# Cobourg knitter spreads cheer around the world

By CECILIA NASMITH Northumberland Today.com

COBOURG -- When local child therapists Sandra Webb and Hannah Sun-Reid leave for Haiti this week, they'll be toting along dozens of small knit dolls created by Cobourg knitter Sheila Johnson.

Johnson also knit a huge batch for them to take to China last month, and to Russia last year. So her little knitted treasures are now in the hands of delighted children all around the world.

Webb (a therapist and adoption practitioner) and Sun-Reid (a child psychotherapist) surprised Johnson last week, when she came to Webb's Cobourg office to drop off a bag of 50-plus dolls. They presented her with a beautiful silk scarf from China and a thank-you cake to enjoy as she looked at photos from their trip.

Johnson loved seeing one of her dolls on the Great Wall of China, but it was also nice to see them being presented individually to children or clutched in bunches in the arms of nurses and therapists who use them in their work with their littlest patients.

The therapists had gone to China in early September, Johnson's daughter Penny Crawford said. Since then, her mother had completed 50 dolls, in varying shades of dark complexion for Haitian children, all dressed and accessorized differently.

Along with the knitting, there's the assembling, stuffing and decorating, she said -- mufflers, little purses, different hats, even the lacy trim Johnson taught herself to crochet. Crawford's best estimate is that her mother can finish maybe one and a half per day.

In all, she's created hundreds.

These are all variations on the Izzy dolls so many volunteers knit for soldiers to take to war-ravage countries as comfort items for the children.

They were first made by Carol Isfeld of British Columbia, whose son -- Master Corporal Mark Isfeld -- was stationed in Croatia on a peace-keeping mission in the early 1990s. He wrote to his mother about how children in the war zone had little in the way of personal possessions. She began crocheting and sending over little woollen dolls he could give to the children he met.

At age 31, Isfeld was killed on duty June 21, 1994, while removing land mines. His mother crochet and send over the dolls, sharing with others her pattern (complete with uniform to simulate UN peace-keeping troops).

In the years since, the dolls have been produced in non-military versions as well. ICROSS Canada distributes them, and knitters provide them to doctors, missionaries and students working around the world.

Johnson first knit the dolls two or three years ago for the Quota International organization, then began knitting them for CFB Trenton. They got great quantities of the little dolls overseas simply by using their small cushiony bodies as packing material.

Through her daughter's friendship with Webb, Johnson got another idea. Learning of the Cobourg therapist's trips to work with children around the world, she decided that's where she wanted her dolls to go.

Informed by Sun-Reid of another trip to China planned in March, Johnson warned her to get two suitcases ready.

"As long as you ladies keep travelling, I'll keep knitting," she promised.



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From left, child psychotherapist Hannah Sun-Reid and adoption practitioner Sandra Webb welcomed Cobourg knitter Sheila Johnson to Webb's office last week to thank her for the 50-plus knitted dolls they will be taking with them to Haiti for the children in that earthquake-ravaged country.

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A small representative sample of the little dolls Cobourg resident Sheila Johnson has created for children in Haiti shows the variety she produces in spite of the dolls all coming from one simple pattern.