

## Expansion gives new life to ministry



**Expansion gives new life to ministry.** SHE IS SEW ON FIRE: Wendy Hagar works in Sew on Fire ministries' newly-expanded warehouse space for collection of everything from pencil cases to diapers to be shipped around the world to those in need. *Michael Ivanin – Burlington Post*

“We want to be ready all the time. We’re always working on five to 10 shipments at one time. It just keeps getting bigger. The place is bustling.” - Wendy Hagar, Sew on Fire

If Wendy Hagar had known 12 years ago the massive operation her home-based Sew on Fire ministries would become, she admits she would have

backed off.

Today she can't imagine life without it.

Last year, when she was desperately searching for larger donated warehouse space, but to no avail, her husband Jeff raised the possibility that it might mean the end of Sew on Fire.

“My life has totally changed because of it,” said the irrepressible Hagar, who launched the ministry after being inspired by a visiting missionary's stories of abject poverty. “I couldn't imagine my life could ever go back to the way it was. What would I do? Would I play tennis, play more golf?”

Walking the aisles of her cavernous 6,000-square-foot warehouse, two units down from her old space in an industrial plaza on Fraser Drive, is where she belongs.

The new space, which Hagar was forced to rent, is a far cry from Sew on Fire's humble beginnings as a simple sewing ministry in the family home that overtook seven rooms and a double garage for four years.

Sew on Fire is a full-time commitment for Hagar who lives and breathes every aspect of the operation. Today, the ministry is partnered with 160 Canadian charitable organizations.

Over the years, Hagar has cultivated a myriad of business partnerships “for life,” which are responsible for donations of everything from labels to shampoo and Velcro. She has an army of volunteers, approximately 50 regulars but the numbers swell when girl guides and hockey teams descend upon the warehouse to sort, and pack, and stuff. The work is never ending, said Hagar.

“We want to be ready all the time. We’re always working on five to 10 shipments at one time. It just keeps getting bigger.”

By ready, Hagar means to meet the unending immediate demands from a world in desperate need of the basic necessities of life.

The warehouse has an incoming door and an outgoing one and shipments constantly arrive from all over the nation.

“The place is bustling.”

Boxes and boxes are stacked against warehouse walls, all meticulously labelled, hundreds and hundreds of items to fill every type of Sew on Fire bag — 20,000 bags go out the door annually to women, children, men, families and

teachers, mainly in developing countries. There are even small handcrafted cloth bags equipped with a bar of soap, toothbrush, toothpaste and Band-Aids that aid workers hand to destitute kids living in dumps.

Along with donated items, both new and used, her volunteers continue to sew. They sew the bags that are filled to capacity, brightly-coloured cloth backpacks with drawstrings, cloth diapers from flannel sheets, tiny 'pillowcase' dresses, shorts, pencil cases, even simple, long skirts and sleeveless tank tops for women.

"I hate sewing and I'm in charge of a sewing ministry," smiled Hagar.

She has thousands of photos, some adorning the office walls, of the smiling faces of children and women around the world, recipients of the generosity of her ministries. After more than a decade, Hagar can quickly customize a bag for any need and airline weight restriction.

"Someone may come in and say we're going to Uganda, to an orphanage that has 50 kids all babies, or ages 5 to 18." Requests for 1,500 bags for an orphanage are not unusual, she said.

In 12 years, Sew on Fire ministries has helped thousands upon thousands of people in 91 countries, places like Uganda, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Mexico and closer to home, Brantford and even Hamilton where laundry baskets full of supplies are donated to refugee families.

This week, a shipment of 654 boxes and an array of crutches and wheelchairs made its way to Egypt.

Sew on Fire may be "Burlington's best kept secret," but it is a go-to source for Canadian charities and its reputation beyond its home base is such that when closing, a jewelry store in Newfoundland forwarded all its stock to Hagar's ministry. Knitted items continually arrive at the warehouse from all over the country. She's had half a tractor-trailer full of material and \$30,000 in thread delivered to her door.

"First of all I really think people just want to make a difference. When you see the hurt around the world, it's our responsibility, we have a responsibility to do what we can do."

She believes God is showering blessings on Sew on Fire. She relies on her faith when she walks through doors cold-calling for things she needs.

"I'll say I need this but I don't have any money and they'll say, "Ok, how does this work?" and I'll say, 'It's the FOG, the Favour of God.' I'm buying on faith."

To celebrate Sew on Fire's move, an official grand opening is being held tomorrow (Friday) and Hagar has invited not just local dignitaries but Premier Dalton McGuinty and the Prime Minister, no less.

"Why not," she shrugs with a big grin.

There will be a coffee and smoothie bar, silent bid auctions for gift baskets and tours of the facility. There will be opportunities to sponsor a backpack for \$25 and sign up for \$1 a day for a one-year donation.

The new warehouse now features a small shop open to the public where customers can pick up bargains on an assortment of jewelry, purses, knickknacks, even screwdrivers as well as bid on a selection of silent auction items each month.

All proceeds will go towards rent.

"I was hoping to get something free but that offer never came, but people value what we do."