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Ossining missionary uses soccer to help kids in Africa

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Earlier this year, a freelance documentarian and traveler arrived at the Bernard Nordkamp Center in the African nation of Namibia. There, Bill Bowles got a tour of the home for 70 of the nation's AIDS orphans, and a group of girls told him they were called the Little Pumpkins.

With a confidence unique to a 10-year-old, a girl named Salome told Bowles they were soccer players, good ones, and they played boys teams because there were no other teams for girls their age. One of the little girls led him through a break in the wall to the dirt field they play on every Saturday.

These players were organized by Ossining native MaryBeth Gallagher, who has traveled the world with the Maryknoll lay missionaries and now works at the center in Namibia as a Maryknoll volunteer. She organized kids into a league that now numbers 500 kids and plays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturdays.

"She's one of these people who marks every sentence with exclamation points, and every other sentence with two exclamation points," said Keith Hammonds, a board member of Ossining's American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO).

For the poor children of Namibia, there is no Sports Authority to hand out cleats and jerseys, so Gallagher has relied upon a network of soccer clubs here in Westchester - such as Hammonds' group - for cast-off gear that her players can wear.

The Ossining AYSO program is holding a cleat drive through the holidays. So far about 30 cleats have been donated in the boxes at St. Theresa's Church and Ossining High School.

Hammonds said the donations are good for the kids in Namibia - and here, too.

"I do hope there are dinnertime conversations around this as well," Hammonds said.

The Little Pumpkins got their name because of the orange jerseys they wear, donated by the Briarcliff AYSO. Sometimes there are two kids who wear the same number, but it doesn't matter to Gallagher's players. She writes in her blog from Namibia that these uniforms are coveted items.

Players can expect to earn different items depending on how long they stick with the program. First they

In her own words

MaryBeth Gallagher writes a blog from her post in Namibia, a country in Africa. Last June, she described the soccer program she helps organize and equip.

"On Saturdays the soccer program is as strong as ever! We have about 600 kids playing: 48 teams, 24 games (eight games on three fields) from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. We even get the grass field one weekend every other month, which is a HUGE event!

"After playing for two years on the gravel, broken glass and thorns, it is sheer delight for the kids to run barefoot through the grass and slide and roll without being covered with cuts and scrapes!

"Nobody even cares whether they win or lose, they all just LOVE being out there! I wish I could get it every weekend, but they simply won't give it to me more than once in a blue moon!

"Every child is in a jersey donated from friends in the USA and Canada, and the kids who play for six months are then awarded with shorts, then three months later socks, and if they play for one year, they get soccer boots. Thanks to all of you who collected soccer gear and hauled it over here! The kids love it and play with great pride when they are in uniforms!"



get a jersey, then after six months shorts, and later cleats. The Ossining AYSO has already sent those 30 pairs of cleats and hopes to collect enough for a second shipment in January.

It might be hard for many kids in the Lower Hudson Valley to understand that their used clothes and worn shoes have so much value.

For Hammonds, who worked in Namibia with his wife, Jackie Dyer, before they had children, the poverty there doesn't seem impossible to imagine. Now his two soccer-playing daughters, Tara, 11, and 8-year-old Clare, as well as 13-year-old Conor, are participating in the cleat drive.

"It feels good to help," Clare said. "Because the shoes they have are made out of cut-out tires, and they'll be getting these shoes."
