

Global Backpack PROJECT

Delivering Packs, Pencils and Promise to Children Around the Globe



Fathieh, age 10, and her sister Farah, age 8, get good grades in school and have dreams of finishing high school, something no one in their family has done. Yet each day, there are obstacles they must overcome just to stay in school, let alone excel in the classroom.

Fathieh and Farah live in Jordan in a small village with four siblings. Like in other war-torn regions, daily conflict continues to disrupt their everyday life in tragic ways. Economic pressures on their family make it increasingly difficult to make school a priority when help is needed at home. This is especially true for girls, who can often seem invisible in the developing world.

Yet remarkably, these sisters have not only stayed in school, they are both at the top of their class. Fathieh and Farah know that finishing high school paves a path to a future with opportunities and choices. Getting an education is their best chance to break the cycle of poverty in their family. And by staying in school, these young girls serve as pioneers—giving younger girls and boys the right to dream as well.

In 2008, Global Backpack Project provided the two sisters with backpacks and school supplies—small, yet meaningful gifts that serve as daily reminders that ***You can do it. You can stay in school. We believe in you.*** Both girls were very encouraged.

“Before I had my backpack, nobody paid much attention to me,” said Farah. “Now everyone wants to carry my bag for me on the way to school. I like going to school.”

Global Backpack Project was born because of young girls like Fathieh and Farah. The packs not only provided a practical way to carry books and supplies to school, they carried promise for a positive future for girls, their families and communities. Further, if a handful of backpacks delivered to a small group of girls in Jordan could make a difference, why not try to help more children in regions where I traveled for my Portland-based boutique. After all, these cultures had given me so much. I wanted to give back.

Nearly seven years ago, my husband and I opened a small shop full of traditional handmade textiles and handicrafts from Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cultures. Since we first opened our doors, we have met the most compassionate people who share our thirst for learning. When I conveyed our idea of helping girls stay in school, they asked, “How can we help?”

And they did help—generously. Almost as soon as I mentioned the backpack idea, one of our customers organized a backpack drive featuring international music and cuisine

in her backyard. Nearly a hundred guests attended with colorful backpacks chock full of school supplies and handwritten notes to the children. I realized that we were not only promoting education, we were building bridges – both within our own community and between cultures.

Since that first backpack drive, we've continued to build relationships and momentum exponentially. In just two years, we've delivered packs and supplies to school children in Jordan, Turkey, Cyprus, Morocco and SW Portland.

Although we are just getting started, our project model shows great promise. We collect backpacks, school supplies and monetary donations from our local community and deliver them to children living in marginalized communities around the globe. And importantly, because we are 100 percent fueled by volunteers, we have no overhead costs, so all donations go directly to helping children. Thus far, we've relied on word-of-mouth and community outreach efforts to spark interest and involvement. Positive media coverage has also raised awareness about our efforts.

After two years of success, we are ready to take our grassroots efforts to a new level. We plan to expand our reach by targeting larger populations, such as a group of approximately 700 children in a small village in Uganda who need backpacks, school supplies and funds for school uniforms; otherwise, they cannot go to school. Should Global Backpack Project receive the Ruby Award, it will apply the funds to these girls in need. We also plan to approach local schools with pen pal programs and backpack donation drives.

Thank you for considering Global Backpack Project for the Soroptimist Ruby Award. We look forward to partnering with like-minded organizations such as the Soroptimist Club to enhance the lives of women and girls around the globe in 2010 and beyond.