

Seamstress uses sewing skills to give to those in need



Photos and story by Moush Sara John

A flushed face looks up from the sea of bright, colourful dresses. Among the cluttered, handmade piles of clothes covering the workstation and the floor, two small dresses stand out, yet to have buttons and ribbons on them.

Carol Vellekoop is trying to meet a deadline, stitching a few more dresses and shirts before she can speak more about her work.

Vellekoop is a dressmaker and seamstress based in Belleville and she has been using her skills to help those in need.

"I truly love to sew for people who are in need. I am part of a group of people who have been sewing clothing for orphans in Africa."

Having been introduced to sewing in her childhood, Vellekoop has been hooked.

"My mother taught me how to sew when I was just a young girl and I have enjoyed doing so in a variety of ways ever since. I have sewn for my immediate and extended family and friends for just the enjoyment of it for years.

"Then, about 14 years ago, I found a job tailoring in a men's clothing store. I had to learn a few more techniques to be good enough to work on the expensive items that were for sale but within a week the lady who was retiring said I was ready. I worked there for about 12 years."

But recently changes in the family helped Vellekoop decide to go on her own. She was ready to have her own tailoring business.

"Two years ago, I felt that my time was needed to help my extended family. My mother going through open heart surgery. My father needed more time and help at the end of his life and on the flip side, my children were having children of their own and wanted my help with that as well.

"So I decided to quit working at the clothing store and started my own tailoring business. That way I could do as much or as little as was needed."

When Monica Lafond and her husband Mateo wanted to start a rental shop for wedding and bridal dresses in La Caleta, a small community in the Santo Domingo Province of the Dominican Republic, they turned to Max and Kina Vantil's organization, of which Vellekoop has been an integral part.

"They needed help. So we decided to get together and contacted as many people we could, asking them for wedding dresses they would not use, or didn't know what to do with. The response was truly overwhelming. We had boxes and boxes of bridesmaids' dresses and bridal dresses that we could take. And most of them were impeccable."

Vellekoop exudes a quiet power, of peace and stillness as she speaks to me about the orphanage she has been associated with for about 12 years, founded by Faith Liyena.

Faith left her home in Kitwe for Mukinge Hospital, some 400 kilometres away, to train as a Zambian-enrolled nurse. After completing her nurses training in 1991, she served one year as a graduate nurse at Mukinge before returning to her home in Kitwe. She then entered midwifery training and graduated, before she started the orphanage in 1993.

"In her nursing, Faith saw so many children that were orphaned due to AIDS that she felt a true calling to help them to make something of themselves. They can't do so without a helping hand though, so she founded Faith's Orphans Fund.

"We help support her ideas of placing these children in homes in their communities with some financial support for food, school, and medicine. With our help she has purchased a farm with property to help as many children as possible by teaching them life skills as well as regular schooling.

"They learn how to raise poultry for meat and eggs, grow crops, build beehives and harvest honey, build simple furniture, sew clothing - especially uniforms for school, cook healthy meals, among other things."

With a store on the property that is conveniently located along a major route, they sell many of the things produced at the farm. This is only a small step in becoming financially independent, and self-sufficient.

Vellekoop has ceaselessly helped out with her sewing skills, and continues to do so as she stitches the last ribbon on one of the dresses.

"They love bright colours and pockets. The pockets are for small change and carrying little things. It is touching how little their wants are."

Vellekoop speaks about how important it is to empower children and "teach them how to fish, rather than giving them the fish. We need to teach them the necessary skills and trade, so that they can look after themselves, and be self-sufficient."



Carol Vellekoop's favourite pastime has been sewing ever since she was introduced to the craft as a child, and she has put it to good use over the years.



(Left) Vellekoop has been working with the Faith orphanage for over 10 years and knows what would work in terms of colours, patterns, and style of dress and shirts for the children there.

(Above) These are shirt sleeves that would have been disposed, but it's important to be creative. "I will stitch these on to dresses and make them into dress sleeves. They are bright and will work well with solid colours."



Empty thread bobbins at the work table, where Vellekoop spends hours stitching dresses and shirts for children in Zambia.