

East Texas woman's shoebox ministry has global reach

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CENTER—Bone and joint disease and arthritis have robbed Sally Smith of many of the ministries she once enjoyed, but God has given her a new way to wrap her arms around children.

“From seminary days, missions has been very close to our hearts, but God never sent us overseas,” Smith recalled.



Instead, God called Smith and her husband, Carl, to college campuses across Louisiana, where they served as Baptist Student Ministry missionaries 13 years before [First Baptist Church in Center](#) called him to be its minister of education. Now he is retired.

While she has battled health issues throughout her life, the last several years have been particularly difficult. She no longer can travel on mission trips, speak at retreats and women's groups, or lead Bible studies.

“I have bone and joint disease, and my spine continually deteriorates, which causes horrendous pain,” she said. Three lung diseases make breathing difficult.

“I am on heavy medication, but that doesn't come close to taking away all the pain. If I were not a believer, I would already have done away with myself, but I know he has a day and a time,” Smith confessed.

“I have only been able to make it to church services three times this year. I used to be up here all the time, but I just can’t do it anymore.”

Bringing joy to children she’ll never meet

What she can do is pack shoeboxes with toys and treats to bring joy to children she never will meet.

As a Girls in Action teacher, she led the girls in her charge to pack shoeboxes for Samaritan Purse’s Operation Christmas Child from the time the ministry started more than 20 years ago.

Smith always packed a few shoeboxes for Samaritan’s Purse, but only a few until she began sharing the experience with her grandchildren. The number escalated as her health began to decline.

In 2012, she packed 60 boxes. In 2013, that number skyrocketed to more than 500.

Last year, the Smiths traveled more than 6,000 miles for appointments with specialists. Those weren’t wasted miles, however, because she was looking for bargains on things to pack in her boxes.

She once saw a buggy of toys included in a sidewalk sale.

“When I got back in the car, I said, ‘Carl, I got each of those little toys for 33 cents,’” she recalled. “And he said, ‘But did you have to get the whole buggy?’ He’s very patient with me.”

A consuming passion

Collecting toys to fill shoeboxes for children around the world became a consuming passion and welcome diversion.

“During the nights when I can’t sleep because of the pain, this has been an

emotional and mental release for me. I think I would have gone berserk if I hadn't had something else to focus on," Smith said.

By the end of April, she already topped last year's total.

"They're not sent off until the end of November, so I don't know what the Lord has in store," she said.

As the ministry expanded, she received help from others. Two seamstress sisters—neither of whom attends church—committed to make 500 drawstring bags for girls and 500 stuffed animals for boys. A local business gives her countertop chips to which she adds rhinestones and stickers and then strings on chains to make necklaces. Her son gives her the overruns from his silkscreen T-shirt shop to include in the boxes.

"As people find out, they want to join and help. It's exciting to see how God is reaching out, and I have no idea where this is going, but I know he gave me that passion. The main thing is for these children to be blessed and for people who are not walking with the Lord to come closer to him," Smith said.

The biggest obstacle she faces is paying \$7 per box for shipping. Last year, several First Baptist Sunday school classes made donations to help, and those covered about half. This year, she will need even more help.

'God has something for you'

"One of the main things I want people to know is that no matter the situation you are in, God has something for you. Though I am home most of the time, this is my ministry," she said.

Smith is grateful God has given her a way to bless children.

"We have been overseas on mission trips, and I always loved to put my arms around the little kids," she said. "I can't do that anymore. So, through

Samaritan's Purse, my arms are going around them in another way."