*Wok & Roll by Peter Kwong, (Frederic) Inter-County Leader*

**More than just a shoebox**

A few weeks ago, I read an article written by Mary Stirrat, a staff writer for the Inter-County Leader, on the “shoebox operation” up here in the Northwoods. I was touched in many different ways, realizing what an operation that is, to be able to touch someone’s heart when they are desperately in need of a sign to show that someone out there is thinking about them and cares about how they are doing.

I couldn’t sleep after reading that article, especially reading about one of the many recipients, Mr. Yves Duschime, a Rwandan refugee from Togo, Africa. He was holding a shoebox with a smile, the same kind of shoebox he received 15 years ago. Of course, the contents might be different, but the memory of getting something wonderful from whoever out there would last a lifetime.

Growing up in a frugal environment in Hong Kong, when owning a couple pencils, a pencil sharpener and an eraser was considered luxurious, I couldn’t imagine possessing anything in life more than that. So, what’s with these shoebox operations? I couldn’t help but contact Wyman Johnson, the connection of the operation in northwestern Wisconsin, just to find out more of what it is all about.

So, we got together and chatted about this operation, as living up here in the Northwoods for more than five years now, I’ve never heard of any “shoebox operations.” I always believe in giving back to help others. Well, easy to say, but I do not have a lot to give back, as I do not possess much. So, my giving back is my ability to do cooking demonstrations and donate my skills to raise money for whatever purposes. In a sense, it works, as my donation raises thousands of dollars, and that makes me feel good.

Living in the Northwoods all these years, I thought that this is a haven for everyone, except for the snowstorms and blizzards once in a great while. Driving through different towns, all I see are farmhouses, barns with different domestic animals grazing slothfully from place to place; or better yet, all these beautiful homes around different lakes. This must be La-La land, I told myself.

Then a few years ago, I found out that things are not as peachy dory as they seem to be. I was teaching a cooking class in Spooner, and the administrator asked me if I could come earlier and teach an “after-school” cooking class. I love to teach, so of course, I said yes with no hesitation. Little did I know that my students were all “kids.”

At my age, anyone under 30 years old is a kid. But these kids were anywhere from 8 to 12 years old. Very polite, courteous and well mannered. So, I taught them how to make enchiladas and spring rolls, simple and easy dishes that are also delicious. They enjoyed the lesson, and were very thankful.

Afterward, I asked one of the teachers just what was the after-school class about, couldn’t the kids just go home? She smiled and said, “No, these kids have no home to go to after school.” Their parents were either at work, or worse, in jail. So, after school, they would stay with a special program for a few hours more, until someone would pick them up.

My heart just dropped. What? Here in America, where the roads are paved in gold, how could this be?

Then it reminded me of a couple of incidents that I wouldn’t forget as long as I live. I was in Guatemala doing some restaurant consulting work. The owner and I passed through the local market, as we were on our way to search for an appropriate location. There I saw a big, huge pile of garbage where the vendors just dumped their waste. The garbage truck would arrive the next day to clear up the mess. I was in awe, seeing that there were 20-30 children, probably 6 to 10 years old, scrounging through the garbage searching for “stuff” that they could take home. I couldn’t help but think about what their homes looked like.

Wyman told me that many churches are already involved in the Operation Christmas Child program, sometimes just called Operation Shoebox; that they would ask folks to get a shoe box and stuff it with either school supplies or hygiene stuff, maybe even a soccer ball … stuff that is simple for us, but means the world to kids who have nothing. If it is too troublesome to shop and pack a shoe box, then you can also send $25 to Operation Christmas Child ($16 for the supplies plus $9 for handling and shipping).

For more information, please contact Wyman Johnson at 715-791-4952 or wymarjohnson@gmail.com. If, in our lifetime, we can touch just one person’s life and make it better, then we have done our part.

Christmas is approaching, join the crusade and see a child’s smile.