

'Joy of Sox' founder has distributed 350,000 pairs of socks to the needy

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The Upside

by Shaun Brady, Updated: September 30, 2019- 5:00 AM



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Most of us don't spend much time thinking about socks. We slip on a pair in the morning before throwing on our shoes and heading out for the day. On those annoying occasions when we discover a hole, we simply toss that sock in the trash and grab another.

For people struggling with homelessness, though, socks are a major problem. While plenty of people donate their old shirts or jackets or pants, few think to donate a brand new pair of socks to a clothing drive. But the lack of decent footwear can lead to health issues, from

infections to frostbite to diabetes-induced swelling — which, in severe cases, can necessitate amputation.

To help get socks to populations in need, Tom Costello Jr. founded the Joy of Sox, a nonprofit that collects tens of thousands of socks each year and distributes them to shelters and other aid agencies providing services to Philadelphia’s homeless population.



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Villanova students lend a hand in a day of service, sorting un-matched pairs of sox at the Joy of Sox warehouse in Phoenixville, Pa. Bradley C Bower.

“People usually focus on helping the homeless with food and other necessities that come with sheer survival,” said Adam Bruckner of Philly Restart, a group that helps people in need with obtaining their identification and with meal services. “But socks are just so important, both for health issues and just because of the dignity and respect they provide.”

Costello, an adjunct professor at Montgomery County Community College and former engineer, didn’t set out to become an advocate for the homeless. Much the opposite, in fact. “I used to be really homeless-phobic,” he admitted. “If I saw a homeless guy, I’d have to cross the street or avoid eye contact.”

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Despite his trepidations, Costello eventually accompanied his wife to a local homeless shelter where she had been volunteering. While there, a volunteer podiatrist mentioned the health issues caused by lack of socks, and Costello the idea figured that donating socks would be a simple way he could continue to help. The couple returned during the holiday season, and as people left the shelter he handed out pairs of socks.

"This lady looked me in the eyes and said, 'No one has ever given me a pair of socks before.' Then she started to cry," Costello recalled. "She reached out to give me a hug and, poof, that was my epiphany moment. On the way home I thought, 'I've got to be the sock guy.'"



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Millicent Gaskell, left, and Kallie Stahl wrestle a tub of sox at the Joy of Sox warehouse to be cataloged and bagged for distribution to the homeless. Bradley C. Bower

In the near-decade since that moment, the Joy of Sox has distributed nearly 350,000 pairs of socks. Costello started the nonprofit at his home in Wayne, until donations filled his garage. A benefactor eventually donated the use of a 2,500-square-foot warehouse in Phoenixville, able to accommodate the large-scale donations sometimes delivered by clothing manufacturers alongside the smaller contributions made during sock drives at local schools.

Sometimes the donations have helped people dealing with severe health crises: the man who stepped off a curb into a puddle and was forced to wear wet socks for weeks, until a doctor had to cut them off with a scalpel before gangrene set in; or the woman whose health issues stemmed from wearing oily potato chip bags in place of socks. Just as often,

the donations help people take a step up, like the man who received a pair of dress socks for a job interview to the child whose new socks stopped him from getting bullied at school for having worn the same pair every day.

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Signage is shown at the Joy of Sox warehouse Saturday Sept. 21, 2019 in Phoenixville, Pa.
Bradley C Bower

The name of Costello's organization is a pun on *The Joy of Sex* — the popular 1970s sex manual. The pun caught the attention of Rachel Falkove, executive director of Philadelphia Interfaith Hospitality Network, a coalition of congregations and businesses that works to assist families facing homelessness.

"I grew up at a time when *The Joy of Sex* was quite a well-known book, so I just wanted to meet the quirky person behind an organization named The Joy of Sox," Falkove said with a laugh. "It's one of the more unique nonprofit organizations, and it truly brings cheer to the many different groups who receive their socks."

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Help with seemingly small things like socks, Falkove continued, gives struggling families the time to focus on the larger issues they face. "By helping people with all sorts of material support, we can help them concentrate on big things like housing and utilities," Falkove said. "People with children have to stretch their budgets in ways that those of us who have enough to live on can't even begin to imagine. For our families, this takes some stress off."



The mission of Joy of Sox has been taken on by other volunteers, who Costello refers to as "sock angels." Sami Grady started collecting socks in Milwaukee in 2015, after a Thanksgiving discussion with her family about an article she'd read online. Teaming with her social worker aunt, she set out to collect 500 pairs of socks; they ended up with more than 2,000 by Christmas. They've now collected more than 12,000 pairs with the support of the Joy of Sox.



"People really appreciate having clean, dry socks," Grady said. "It's something that we all take for granted, but often people come through the food line and appreciate the socks even more than the meal."



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