

Eric PERLYN

1996
Caring
Awards



There is a tradition in the Perlyn household, one that inspired then 12-year-old Eric to think about ways he could serve those less fortunate. All three Perlyn children were encouraged by their parents to develop community service projects that addressed the specific needs of the people in Boca Raton. A Jewish boy coming of age, he carried on the family tradition by using his bar mitzvah money to do good. Eric had been struck by an article about a young boy who had asked Santa Claus for shoes. He discovered that in Fort Lauderdale, next to Boca Raton, some children desperately needed good shoes. He had found his calling.

Perlyn, now a freshman at Duke University, remembers thinking he could have doled out a check for shoes after his bar mitzvah. But that wouldn't have given him the opportunity to meet those he was helping. He contacted the Children's Home Society (CHS) and learned of a family of six brothers who needed shoes. He arranged to take the boys to lunch and afterward guided them to

a shoe store, where he encouraged the brothers to make their own selections. The brothers couldn't believe their good fortune, and their excitement spurred young Perlyn on.

The following year he again asked CHS for names of youngsters who needed shoes. Armed with their ages and shoe sizes, he approached more than 100 Fort Lauderdale shoe store managers several months before Christmas to see whether they would consider donating shoes for his project. They complied, and each child on the list was presented with a gift-wrapped pair of shoes.

Perlyn named his program Stepp'n Up and formed a nonprofit corporation. In 1992 he expanded his scope by involving fellow Pine Crest School peers in the collection effort, contacting shoe manufacturers directly, and spreading the word among other charitable organizations. That year he received more shoes than names on the CHS list and was able to distribute the extras to the Hurricane Andrew relief effort.

In 1993 he distributed more than \$5,000 worth of shoes from 40 companies, assisting 200 children. They were treated to a celebration at a local restaurant before the annual distribution party at CHS. Dave Thomas, founder of Wendy's and a board member of the CHS, delivered toys and \$5 spending money to each child.

Thomas also provided entrée to some of this country's larger clothing manufacturers. Perlyn approached The Limited Too and, in late 1995, received 2,700 pairs of shoes from the

retail chain. Shoe manufacturers Sam & Libby also donated several hundred pairs.

Reaching beyond the annual holiday distribution effort has fueled Perlyn's desire to expand Stepp'n Up's reach. Last summer he developed a guide that will allow other young people to replicate Stepp'n Up nationwide—his ultimate goal. At Duke he has begun a Stepp'n Up chapter. To date, Stepp'n Up has donated more than 5,400 pairs of shoes.

Perlyn sheds some light on his continued enthusiastic involvement:

"Six years ago when we first started collecting shoes for needy kids, we put some of the tiniest shoes on equally tiny feet. As these children have grown, I am confident that those shoes and the shoes that followed played a significant role in their physical and mental growth. When we began, I had no idea of how important a pair of shoes could be to a young child. Today, I could fill this letter with wonderful stories I have heard from social workers and teachers who have seen the effects of our shoes on their children's self-esteem, confidence, and sociability."

The Perlyn family is fond of quoting Aristotle: "The habits we form from childhood make no small difference; rather they make all the difference." Perlyn has learned this lesson well. And the thousands of Florida youngsters who have new shoes on their feet can give thanks to Perlyn and a Greek philosopher who lived 2,000 years ago.