

Take Action: Milk Bags for Haiti

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Identify your concern.

In August 2005 Haiti was severely hit with a hurricane that wreaked havoc everywhere that its path took it. Families were torn apart by the death of many loved-ones and homes were completely destroyed. In 2010, Haiti also suffered from an earthquake that still forces people to live in make-shift tent communities or on the streets. Our concern is that the people of Haiti lack sufficient sleeping areas and need dry, warm, bug-proof areas to sleep in/something to sleep on.

The plastic milk bags can also be detrimental to the environment. Plastic takes a very long time to break down, it depends a lot on the specific type of plastic as well as the environment that it is in (exposure to the sunlight can help speed up the process). Plastic never actually 'decomposes' it merely breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces. Because it is an inorganic material it never actually will compost. Plastic in landfills can affect water sources and the chemicals can be absorbed into food.

We hope to not only help those affected by both the hurricane and the earthquake in Haiti but also to implement a positive effect on our environment in Canada.

Research your concern.

From being part of the school system we had overheard that some schools within New Brunswick had been collecting Milk Bags as a support to create sleeping and surgical mats

in Haiti (“Milk Bags for Haiti ” - Founder: Angela Kesthely). From some further research it became known that many schools across the country have been actively participating in this initiative. Schools are not only doing this to support children and families in Haiti but also to save the enormous amount of milk bags that fill our landfills.

Through research we found a City News Toronto news clip of children and volunteers crocheting and creating mats from the milk bags that had been collected. From there we contacted the Multicultural Association of New Brunswick because they had been into contact with Angela to support those in the province that participated in this program. Some schools just continued to collect the milk bags and give them forward to be crocheted whereas other schools created teams to learn how to crochet the mats on their own.

We decided to take on this initiative and create a plan that not only serves a purpose locally but can also be spread internationally. We decided to take this initiative to our respective schools and communities.

What is Milk Bags for Haiti?

The milk bags create a washable, quick-dry bed mats that provide alternatives to sleeping on the hard, damp ground. The mats can also be used as surgical beds. These mats are crocheted from strips of milk bags which are called plarn (plastic yarn). The milk bags have also been used to make tote bags and other useful items for the people of Haiti.

Why use these?

We want to help the environment by recycling the plastic milk bags and give them a practical use because they take so long to break down. We would also like to help those people who are sleeping on the ground of on leaf/reed mats. The mats made from milk bags protect them from paper cuts from leaves/reeds, dampness and biting insects. The mats are easy to wash and dry and since the earthquake hit there is a desperate need for sleeping placements for the homeless. The mats also provide dry, safe places for surgical tables and beds for medical team (in desperate need since the earthquake).

Find out who supports you.

The first step in finding out who supports us was to propose the idea to our cooperating teachers to see what they thought (Geary Elementary: Tinika Lowe, Royal Road Elementary: Nya Black). From there the next step was to create an outline of the intended plan to present to our principals. After the plan was approved both Jill and I (with our respective students in the classrooms) wrote up an information packet for students to take home to parents. Once the students found out about the initiative they actively became involved.

At both Geary and Royal Road Elementary, the programs were run by our students and the whole school participated in the initiative. Students at each school watched the news clip about why we were collecting the milk bags and what they were being used for. We continued to discuss the use of milk bags in Canada and how they can benefit the Haitian population. We also discussed why the mats would help the Haitian people and also why the milk bags were detrimental to our environment. Students received individual lessons

on the challenges and problems that have arisen in Haiti and how we can support them in making beneficial changes.

In Serena's kindergarten class the students focused on You and Your World, Unit 4: Place and Community. Students were introduced to Haiti and looked at many pictures of different parts of Haiti. Students discussed the type of work that the Haitian people take on, ways to get around, houses, buildings, types of schools, etc. Students worked on understanding maps and features of their community and the differences and similarities between Canada and Haiti.

In Jill's grade 4 class the students used the social studies curriculum focusing on culture and diversity. The general curriculum outcome (GCO) for this unit is that students will be expected to demonstrate an understanding of culture, diversity, and world view, recognizing the similarities and differences reflected in various personal, cultural, racial, and ethnic perspectives. Two specific curriculum outcomes (SCO) that were used in the grade 4 classroom with this take action project were first to describe how groups, institutions and media influence people and society and second to explain why cultures meet human needs and wants in diverse ways.

We also received support from our professor Dr. Ted Christou. Dr. Christou funded our initiative by donating funds to shipping the milk bags to Angela in Toronto, Ontario. Support was also received from UNB students and the Multicultural Association of New Brunswick. Support was also received by the UNB community by publishing our article in the school newspaper, The Brunswickan.

Create a plan.

1. Generate ideas and brainstorm ways to help our environment and the people in Haiti.
2. Narrowing the choices. We decided to focus specifically on plastic (in particular collecting milk bags) because they do not break down in landfills and are not environmentally friendly.
3. Put together a team including the Multicultural Association of New Brunswick, our respective schools (students, teachers and parents), University of New Brunswick and persuaded them to get on board and join our cause. An article about Milk Bags for Haiti was published in the university newspaper, The Brunswickan.
4. Used presentations and letters to provide information to generate interest in our cause.

Take Action.

Once everything was approved the initiative began. Bins were placed in classrooms and the office for milk bags to be collected. Students and teachers began collecting milk bags at home and bringing them in on a daily basis. Students were responsible for making weekly announcements and keeping a running tally of the number of milk bags collected. Because Jill and I were only there on Mondays the tally and announcements were the sole responsibility of our students. Classes set a goal for the number of milk bags they hoped to collect and so did the school. Each school created a goal of at least 250 milk bags by the end of the 2 months.

Evaluate your plan.

We found that the interest from the school community and the students was received well. The students were really excited about the amount of milk bags and really wanted to reach their goals. Both schools did an excellent job of working together as a team. The students were really excited to be able to support those in need. The students also were very interested to learn about the effects of plastic on the environment and in the landfills. The teachers actively participated by collecting the milk bags and supporting the students while we were not present. Also not only was this a positive representation of a Take Action project it created interest of future Take Action opportunities for the schools.

If more time was available we would have promoted this better within the University community by creating posters and having it announced on the radio. If more support was received from that community we could have raised our goal to collect 1000 instead of 500.

Apply your learning.

Jill and I learned:

- how to organize an philanthropic initiative
- how to collect and organize data
- how to run a meeting
- how to write a formal proposal
- how to organize a team of people
- how to rally support from the community

- how to orchestrate a Take Action project with students and keep them excited about it

Our students learned:

- what a philanthropy is
- how to manage success
- how to keep people actively involved
- how to support others internationally
- about Haiti and natural disasters
- the effects plastic has on the environment
- how to participate and work effectively as a team
- about another community different from their own
- how to manage and effectively run a Take Action project

Celebrate your success.

Together both schools collected over 500 milk bags. In order to celebrate our efforts pictures of each class were taken with the milk bags and the pictures were sent with the milk bags and asked to be sent to the families receiving the mats in Haiti. We sent out a newsletter to thank both the students, parents and teachers of both Geary Elementary Community School and Royal Road Elementary School. We also provided them with the information about the number of milk bags that were collected in total. A huge thanks also goes out to Dr. Ted Christou for funding our efforts.

References

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