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Shoe4Africa came into being in the craziest of ways, but its founder has seen it grow to embrace the whole of East Africa

SUFFICIENTLY CHARITABLE:
Toby Tanser.
Photo: ANTHONY NJORGE



THE year is 1995, the event a road race, and the place Machakos.

Toby Tanser is joined at the starting line by a host of other participants as he warms up for the road.

But something is wrong here. Staring down at the forest of legs that have made it to the starting line, he cannot believe that a shoe can be so worn out that it loses its original shape and colour. For his Nike shoes are crowded by a tribe of shoes that has no names, no specific colour, no shape ... just some running gear.

He can't believe his eyes: "I felt embarrassed because back in Sweden I had 30 barely used running shoes dumped under my kitchen table that I would never bother using," he says.

After the race, Toby instructs one of his friends back in Sweden to break into his apartment (his friend did not have Toby's keys) and mail the shoes and other running gear. Then he distributes them to needy athletes in Eldoret where he is staying with his friends.

Visit

All this happened during Toby's first visit to Kenya as an athlete. He had initially intended to stay for five months but extended it to seven because he could not bring himself to kiss goodbye to the hospitality of the Kenyan people.

On his way to the Eldoret Airport for a flight to Nairobi, his taxi driver noticed his running shoes and commented about them.

"He asked me if I could leave him the shoes."

What the heck? He asked himself and handed the shoes to the driver. His philosophy, after all, has always been that if everyone shared their wealth, there would be no poverty in this world.

He had hoped to buy a pair of sandals at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, Nairobi, where he was to get a connecting flight to Sweden. But shock of all shocks. He could not believe his eyes when he touched down at

By Nzivo Mutune

the airport. All the shops had been closed down, so he eased himself into the flight home and sunk into his seat — barefoot!

But his troubles had just begun. They had to switch planes in Paris, but as he waltzed across the airport barefoot, the cops detained him, for he looked every inch a vagabond!

"They found maize flour and *mursik* (Kalenjin for sour milk) in my luggage, and boy weren't they scared! 'Drugs!' they shouted, convinced that they had nabbed a drug trafficker!"

Persuaded

After much persuasion, they eventually bought his story and let him proceed to Sweden, and there, while waiting for a cab, a woman pulled next to him and asked him why he was barefoot yet it was snowing. She offered to drop him at his apartment.

After explaining to her how he ended up being barefoot, the woman removed her shoes and gave them to him so that he would give them to a needy case in Kenya.

It hit him that people could actually respond to a worthy cause. And that's how the idea of Shoe4Africa was born.

The charity is a non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting social empowerment, health initiatives and health awareness through sports.

The idea of Shoe4Africa was finally cemented during a holiday that Toby had in Zanzibar with his fiancé.

One evening he rode with her on a motorcycle to a beach then felt like he needed time alone: "I left her with the bike and started jogging towards a secluded part of the beach."

Robbers

While enjoying the spectacle of the sun's golden rays, he noticed two men walking towards him. The men turned out to be robbers. One had a machete and the other a baseball butt. He suffered a severe and bloody head blow, and a nasty cut on his hand

'MAGIC' SHOE NETS MILLIONS FOR CHARITY

as they stole his wrist watch, sunglasses and one of his shoes.

"They couldn't steal the other shoe since I somehow snatched the machete and fought them off. Dazed, I ran with the one shoe to safety."

That is how Shoe4Africa (not Shoes4Africa) got its name. He credits the one shoe the muggers did not steal for his dear life. Since its inception, thousands of shoes

pamphlets, with some published in Kalenjin, have been distributed.

He has since then brought on board big names like *ER*'s star Anthony Edwards (Dr Mark, Manchester United's Cristiano Ronaldo and celebrated movie director Steven Spielberg, among others.

Toby is also credited with organising the largest all-women races in Kenya.

Participants are normally issued with free T-shirts and running shoes.

Currently, Toby's biggest undertaking is to raise funds that will be invested in building the biggest children's hospital in Africa, and possibly the world, at the Eldoret Referral Hospital.

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