POLK STUDENTS PARTICIPATING

Shoeless Day Will Raise Awareness Of Children's Needs

By Jeremy Morosky
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LAKELAND | Otis "Duff" Chestnut won't be alone when he goes shoeless for a day on Tuesday to raise awareness for the annual TOMS Shoes' One Day Without Shoes event.

His fellow students at Keiser University in Lakeland and students at Lake Wales High School will also be baring their feet.

The event was founded by Blake Mycoskie, the founder of Tom’s Shoes, and is meant to raise awareness about children in developing countries who are without shoes because they can’t afford them.

"It's all about raising awareness," Chestnut said. "There’s no money involved. If you can intrigue someone, people get to talking. And when they talk, they raise awareness about what is happening."

In 2006, Mycoskie was traveling in Argentina when he saw that the children where he was at had no shoes to protect their feet. Upon his return, Mycoskie founded TOMS Shoes with the promise to match every pair of shoes sold with a new pair given to a child in need.

Chestnut, 36, said he and his family, which includes his wife, Jaime, and 17-year-old son, Gage, have been participating in the event for about three years and want to raise awareness about the cause.

His 19-month-old daughter, Sidney, will also be without shoes. But that isn’t particular to Tuesday’s event, he said laughing.

Chestnut is a former plumber who is attending Keiser University to earn a nursing degree.

Chestnut is quick to teach those who are curious about his bare feet.

Without shoes, children are exposed to infection, intestinal worms, and cold weather illness and disease, he said.

"This is how people live every day in certain parts of the world," Chestnut said.

Taking up the one-day challenge isn’t easy, he admits.

"You might get some scrapes and bruises," Chestnut said. "Your feet, they get sore. To do it constantly is difficult. For the most part, it's rough."

At Keiser, Chestnut found a sympathetic ear to his local movement — Rebecca McDonnell, the school's Lakeland campus president.
"He was very passionate about this cause," McDonnell said. "He wanted to have a call to arms on our campus."

But first he asked permission.

Going without shoes is a violation of the school's normal dress code for its 1,200 students and 110 faculty members.

McDonnell said she had no problems accommodating that request and has since involved the university's design and multimedia program to develop and print fliers to raise awareness.

"What I love about the idea is that this is student driven," she said. "He approached us. We get some of the best ideas from our student body."

McDonnell said her staff members are "uber" excited to participate, as well.

"They spend most of their day in suits, ties, dress shoes and stilettos," McDonnell said. "I am a stiletto girl myself, so I'm looking forward to kicking these off for the day."

Students at Lake Wales High will also be able to participate in the event, but they must have a parent sign a permission slip and shoes must be worn to and from the school.

Tuesday's event is part of the school's IMPACT Week, with a focus on issues that affect the world each day of the week.

For more information on One Day Without Shoes, go to www.onedaywithoutshoes.com.

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