



Janice Guzon, a junior at St. Viator High School in Arlington Heights, shows a handful of the thousands of pairs of eyeglasses she has helped collect for donation to the visually impaired in Third World countries. SHAUN SARTIN/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

No end in sight for this project

Collecting eyeglasses has become mission

By Robert Channick
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Janice Guzon is a 16-year-old student with deteriorating eyesight and remarkable vision. Struggling with the consequences of Type 1 diabetes, the junior at St. Viator High School in Arlington Heights organized an international health mission to provide used eyeglasses to Third World countries.

With a Web site and weekly forays to local parishes and senior homes, EYEsee has collected more than 5,000 glasses for needy recipients from the Pacific Islands to Haiti.

"I can personally understand what it's like to have to deal with poor vision," said Guzon of Hoffman Estates. "Without glasses, I just would not be able to function at all."

Launched in January with

the help of classmates Elizabeth Chin, Rachel Conrad, and twin sisters Maeve and Hannah Tibbetts, EYEsee fulfills both a school service requirement and a glaring global need. The World Health Organization estimates 153 million people have uncorrected vision problems. With more than 90 percent of visually impaired people living in developing countries, many do not have access to basic eye care.

Partnering with four relief agencies, Guzon set up eyeseemission.org and began collection drives with marketing campaigns and more than 50 student volunteers. The group has worked primarily with area churches, netting from about 400 to 600 glasses each weekend.

"The response has been just great," Guzon said. "Surprisingly, some people went out to stores and actually bought brand new glasses to give to us."

After using a donated device

to gauge prescription strength, the glasses are cleaned, bagged, boxed and stored in the organizers' basements. The drives will continue through May, Guzon said.

Prompted by a graduation requirement that every student complete 25 hours of religious and community service each year, the project is garnering plenty of extra credit from school officials.

"No one has ever done anything to this scale," said Nora Cay Ryan, a spokeswoman for St. Viator. "They've taken this Christian service project and just completely made it their own."

The group's efforts also are much appreciated by the agencies that will share the eyeglasses.

"It's a neat thing for them, but it's also a neat thing for the areas that we serve, because there are no glasses available out there," said Jacques Spence, co-founder of Canvasback Missions, a California-

based non-profit organization that provides health-care services to the Pacific Islands. "We're getting ready to do an eye trip to the island of Pohnpei in the Federated States of Micronesia in June, and we're looking forward to receiving glasses from the organization to distribute."

Physicians for Peace, a Virginia-based non-profit that provides medical education in developing countries, is planning to distribute its allotment through a new eye care program it started in Haiti. Ron Sconyers, a retired Air Force general who heads up the organization, was effusive about his new suppliers.

"To have a group of students do something like this is pretty rare, and I just think it speaks volumes for them," he said.

EYEsee will collect glasses at 5 p.m. Saturday and throughout the morning Sunday at St. Emily Parish, 1400 E. Central Rd. in Mt. Prospect.