

Greg Woodburn

The Sole Saver *By Daniel T. Durbin, Ph.D.*

Greg Woodburn '12 photographed with just a few of the thousands of running shoes he will donate this year to disadvantaged youth across the globe.



Left: Greg Woodburn entered USC in 2008 as a distance runner. In 2009, he traveled to West Africa and distributed 113 pairs of tennis shoes to children. He is pictured here (right) on one of his morning runs with some of those children.

“Greg vastly underestimated his own salesmanship—and the charity of others. One hundred pairs of shoes soon turned into 500 pairs of shoes. Greg knew he was on to something much larger than a one-time act of charity.”

– Daniel T. Durbin, Ph.D.

USC DISTANCE RUNNER Greg Woodburn managed his greatest athletic achievement while lying flat on his back. It came in 2006 when, sidelined by knee and hip injuries, Greg started a campaign to collect 100 pairs of sneakers for the disadvantaged. Out of that beginning, Greg’s nonprofit organization, Give Running, has grown to have a worldwide impact with more than 13,000 pairs of shoes collected, cleaned, and donated.

Running has played a central role in Greg’s life for as long as he can remember. It brings him peace, focus, strength, and health, and has been a constant in his academic and personal life. But when he was laid up with injuries, he found himself without a clear direction for his boundless energy.

“While at the time I could not have been more devastated by my injuries, today I consider them true blessings,” he says.

That’s because his father challenged him to think of ways he might turn his down time to helping others. Greg turned from worries about his running career to thinking of the many millions of people who might never have the

opportunity to run, or even walk, safely. Many of the disadvantaged in the United States and around the world can never afford shoes at all, let alone the expensive shoes necessary for a career in running.

So, before the 2006 holiday season, Greg started his campaign to collect sneakers. With an evangelical fervor, he set out to reach his initial goal of 100 pairs in just a few short months.

Greg vastly underestimated his own salesmanship—and the charity of others. One hundred pairs of shoes soon turned into 500 pairs of shoes. Greg knew he was on to something much larger than a one-time act of charity.

As he returned to his running career, Greg continued to build his charitable work. He organized his work into “Share Our Soles,” a charity seeking to gather discarded shoes, clean the ones that were still useful, and distribute them to the disadvantaged in the United States and in Third World countries. Share Our Soles soon gave way to “Give Running” (www.giverunning.org).

Realizing from his own experience that running can open doors personally and professionally, Greg created the Give Running motto: “Give opportunity. Give joy.

Give running.”

After entering USC in the fall of 2008 as a distance runner, Greg found that he had many more opportunities to work with others and to help those in need. He set up donation centers at the university, as well as throughout his hometown of Ventura, California. Suddenly, a few hundred sneakers had grown to thousands of sneakers, and Greg found himself traveling well beyond the Pac-12 track-and-field circuit.

During the holiday season of 2009, Greg traveled to Mali, West Africa, with 11 fellow Trojans. They visited Mali as part of the USC African Health Initiative. This initiative brought USC students to the tiny and impoverished village of Sikoro to help create a healthier and safer life for the 500 villagers who call Sikoro home.

Greg talked about the trip in a speech at the USC Student-Athlete Graduation Celebration at the Galen Center last spring. It was another example of “extending the reach of the Trojan Family,” he said. “We join hands across continents, we join hands in triumph and despair, and always we join hands to fight on for each other.”

IN MALI, THE STUDENTS worked to build irrigation for Sikoro’s community garden. Each morning, they worked alongside the women of Sikoro to till, plant, and water the garden. They also worked on plans for a bridge. Sikoro often was cut off from the local health center, schools, and markets by perpetual flooding. The students worked to plan and fund a bridge that would keep Sikoro linked to the outside world.

Greg had motives beyond these projects as he traveled to Mali with the other students. In five duffel bags, stuffed to overflowing, Greg brought 113 pairs of sneakers to Sikoro. Unfortunately, the sneakers were lost on the flight to West Africa and did not appear for the first two weeks. When the sneakers finally arrived, they quickly became the talk of the village. Greg placed a pair of sneakers on the feet of the Chief of Sikoro. That was a life-changing experience, Greg told the *Los Angeles Daily News*. “My hands were shaking, I was so excited,” he said. “Even an hour after it, I could feel the adrenaline rush from it.”

While working in Sikoro, Greg ran several miles around the village each day. On their last morning in the

village, Greg strapped on his running shoes for one final six-mile run. Soon, groups of children began to run with him, many in their new sneakers.

As Greg ran lap after lap around the half-mile loop he had measured in the village, Sikoro children joined him for a lap or two, dropped out so that other children could join, and then rejoined the run later. In what he has called “the most memorable run of my life,” Greg felt the universal joy of running with a group of children from a country half a world away from his home. He also found that 113 sneakers cannot fulfill the needs of even a small village.

Lameen Sacko, a Mali teenager who ran with Greg whenever possible, had to drop out of the run. The ground had become rocky, and Lameen was not one of the Sikoro villagers fortunate enough to receive a pair of sneakers. He had been running barefoot.

As he prepared to leave Sikoro, Greg put on his flip-flops, the only other shoes he brought with him to Mali, and handed his own personal running shoes to Lameen.

It’s been said that no charitable act is complete until it is personal. The charitable became personal for Greg that morning. He had given several thousand pairs of old, discarded shoes to those in need. That morning, he gave the shoes off his feet.

Greg’s USC track career ended in the spring of 2012, but Give Running continues to thrive, taking shoes to the disadvantaged around the world. “Helping others overcome their problems has brought me joy and perspective,” Greg says.

Greg graduated from the university *summa cum laude* with a major in history and double-minors in entrepreneurship and painting. “We leave USC,” Greg told his fellow student-athlete graduates last spring, “but we take USC with us by joining hands to continue the journeys of our lives.”

Unlike many other Trojan stars, Greg Woodburn will never be a world-class athlete. But through his work for others, he is a world-class human being.

Daniel T. Durbin Ph.D. is Director of the USC Annenberg Institute of Sports, Media and Society and has published articles on sports, popular culture, and sports media studies.