Philanthropic Student-Run T-Shirt Business Launches with Newtown-Themed Shirt

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An initiative begun in spring 2012 by Sacred Heart University President John Petillo – to start a campus-based philanthropic t-shirt business as a learning vehicle for students – got a big push forward when the tragic events in Newtown unfolded this past December. The University community was looking for a way to show caring and support, and customized t-shirts, with all funds from sales benefitting The Newtown Scholarship Association’s Sandy Hook Elementary School Memorial Scholarship Fund, became the answer. Now teacher mentors are turning over the reins of the business, called Heartfelt Designs, to students, who are identifying additional causes to support.

“The philanthropic business idea germinated from TOMS Shoes,” said Mary Treschitta, assistant professor of Art & Design. In 2006, American traveler Blake Mycoskie befriended children in Argentina and found they had no shoes to protect their feet. Wanting to help, he created TOMS, a company that would match every pair of shoes purchased with a pair of new shoes given to a child in need. “After a fall 2012 faculty meeting, various departments, including Business, Marketing, Fashion Marketing, Communication and Art & Design, started pooling together,” Treschitta said. She and Jon Walker, chair of the Art & Design Department, took the lead on the creative side and began seeking design work from current undergraduates and alumni from the SHU Art & Design program. “When the Newtown tragedy unfolded, it presented an area of need and a way to parallel Sacred Heart’s mission to be there and help,” said Treschitta.

Jackie Carbonetto, a SHU student majoring in marketing and economics with a concentration in fashion marketing, was asked to participate in the development process. “This tragedy hit so close to our university, and I had two cousins who were students at Sandy Hook,” she said. “This was a great way to give back, while applying our classroom business learning.”

Carbonetto said the development process was quick. A design, featuring the message “Death leaves a heartache no one can heal, love leaves a memory no one can steal,” by SHU alumnus Jay Roeder was used on the shirt. As soon as Walker saw Roeder’s work he asked for permission to use it, and Jay was very excited about contributing the design. One hundred shirts were printed initially, debuting on January 12 at the University Bookstore for $20 apiece. “We wanted to act quickly so the message hit home. We coordinated the bookstore timing with students’ return from winter break,” Carbonetto said. “We sold more than 70 shirts in the first three days.”
Now, another printing run is being considered as the shirts are promoted online at [www.WeAreNewtownShirt.com](http://www.WeAreNewtownShirt.com). At the same time, additional students from various majors are being recruited to take over and run the business. A dedicated website is also planned. Professor Stephen Scarpati, of SHU’s Accounting Department, said the student-run business effort has merits on many levels. “It gives students hands-on experience running a real business, fosters teamwork among students of different skill sets, delivers profits to help others and provides experience for students’ resumes that will look great to future employers.”

Expanding on Scarpati’s remarks, Petillo described the enterprise as “both a learning experience and a service commitment. Students will be corporately responsible for product design, marketing and production. Simultaneously, the profits will be dedicated to help underwrite the students’ community service in Habitat for Humanity, El Salvador, Guatemala, etc. It is corporate learning through giving back,” he said.