

The tale of **20 000 WHEELCHAIRS**



MEMBERS of the Rotary Club of Rushmoor (United Kingdom D1140) celebrated the shipment of the 20 000th wheelchair for needy people in Southern Africa. The wheelchairs, which had been scrapped and donated by the NHS (National Health Services) and other wheelchair users, were loaded into a container in November and shipped to the Rotary Club of Northcliff (D9300). Once the chairs were received by the South African club, they underwent repairs and refurbishment before being donated to needy people in South African and neighbouring countries.



Above: After years of being dragged through her community, for this woman a wheelchair is the start of a whole new life. Bottom left: The need for wheelchairs in Africa is enormous as conflict, disease, accidents and disabilities have rendered thousands disabled. Bottom right: In Africa's rural communities seeing disabled people dragging themselves around is not uncommon. This woman has managed to find a pair of welding gloves to protect her hands as she crawls through her community.



In Africa there is a massive need for wheelchairs which, due to increasing poverty, are often seen as a luxury in some communities and the only mobility disabled people have is when friends and family carry them, push them around in wheelbarrows and carts or drag them on sheets of corrugated iron or cardboard.

The Rushmoor club's 'Freewheeling' project started in 1993 when the Northcliff Rotarians decided to try to alleviate the shortage of wheelchairs in the Johannesburg area and asked Rushmoor if they could help. Soon, other Rotary clubs asked for chairs and a distribution network of more than 100 clubs developed throughout South Africa and the surrounding countries. These clubs collect the refurbished chairs from Northcliff's depot in Johannesburg

and personally deliver and donate the chairs, free of charge, to the needy people they have identified. Chairs are also distributed through the Disabled Association of South Africa.

Freewheeling is one of the Rushmoor club's major international projects and members collect redundant chairs from sources throughout southern England and travel to Birmingham to load containers. Major sources include the Red Cross and NHS repair facilities.

Over the years the Royal Engineers at Gibraltar Barracks have given a great deal of help to the project and they were represented at the loading of the 20 000th wheelchair by Major Dean Ferguson and Sergeant Major Chris Coles. Also present to lend her support was paralympian Helene Raynsford.