

Give a Uniform, Change a Life

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By *Katy Kelleher*

Here in America, school uniforms are viewed as something of an anachronism. Most schools no longer require uniforms, and the ones that do often come with a hefty price tag. However, things are a little different in places like Tanzania and Haiti, where uniforms are required even at public schools, and children who can't afford uniforms can be severely punished, which only discourages attendance.

Fortunately, there is a solution from this problem -- though it comes from a rather surprising sector. Last year, Megan Kelly and Jessica Roy, two Boston-based ladies who work in finance, were alerted to the issue by a friend. Neither was previously aware of the uniform problem, but once they began researching it, they realized that there was a need, one that no nonprofits currently met. They decided to start their own organization, and thus Tailored for Education was born.

We were able to talk to Jess and Megan a bit about their amazing project. Below, they discuss the genesis of the idea, give advice to any philanthropically-minded individuals, and shed a little light on the significance of a new uniform.

How did you end up starting a nonprofit?

Megan: I had a group of girlfriends over for dinner, and one of my friends had volunteered at an orphanage in Tanzania a couple years ago. We were talking about her experience, and she casually mentioned that to provide a school uniform for a child in Tanzania only cost \$17. The next day, I went into work and started researching it. I went to Catholic school myself, so I grew up wearing uniforms, but I never thought that the lack of uniforms would be a major problem. I found that there were no nonprofits that addressed the issue. We didn't find anything that was dedicated just to providing uniforms, so we decided to do something about it.

Can you guys tell us a bit more about why uniforms are so essential? Can the kids go to school without uniforms?

Megan: We hear different stories. In some cases, the teacher will let it slide if the colors are similar. But we've also heard stories from Ghana where the children who don't wear uniforms are whipped every day -- but they still go to school, which I think is so amazing. It's definitely one of the barriers that keep kids from going to school. From everything we've learned, school uniforms have deep cultural roots. They also put all the kids on the same playing field; some of these kids

don't have clothes to wear around, and it makes it so no one has to know that they're the poor kid in the class.

Jess: It also gives a huge sense of pride. To be able to wear something that is new, something that is your own -- it makes you stand out. The kids that go to school are the kids who wear uniforms... We've heard some amazing stories from our partners about the impact of these clothes. After the earthquake in Haiti, we were told about kids coming out of the rubble and out of destruction in their freshly-pressed uniforms. The surrounding environment was a disaster, but they were able to look like nothing had happened. It gave everyone a sense of normalcy.

Megan: And I think this is something we can all identify with. I have to admit I've gone shopping on a Sunday to buy a dress for work on Monday -- it brightens my day a little bit. On a very vain level, I think everyone can identify with the desire to look good in something new, something that is yours. It makes you feel more confident.

What has been the most exciting part so far about working with Tailored for Education?

Jess: I think the best part is having it be ours. It is something we started ourselves, something we can take credit for. We can mold it into what we want it to be. We've also had a really eye-opening learning experience, thanks to all the people we've talked to and all the work we've done along the way. I, for one, didn't know that all of these amazing organizations existed. I had no idea how many people devoted their lives to philanthropic living. You just don't realize how many people are able to drop everything, pick up their lives, and devote all their time to helping other people. I also found that everybody in the nonprofit world is just so kind. Everyone is so open and friendly and willing to help -- and that's very different from certain aspects of the business world.

Megan: In addition to everything Jess said, I think it's really exciting when we're talking to someone and getting a new organization involved. It's great when we get the final number of uniforms that we can provide, when we see what change we can make. To be able to help these children, to give them something that they can wear to school with pride and that is just theirs, I think that's the most exciting part.

Jess: We had a call last week with an organization and it was our first call with them, and when we told them what we could contribute, you could just hear her smiling through the phone. For me, it was that moment. We could hear the whole office cheering and clapping. She said to us: "You have no idea how many children this is going to help, or how far it is going to go." That just makes your day.

Megan: Another thing I love is when we get \$15 donations from strangers. It was one thing when my parents did it, or my grandparents donated. I was so grateful but I knew they were doing it because of me. When we started getting donations from strangers, we were so excited. A \$20 donation from a stranger really does help, because the average cost of a uniform is \$16 to \$20. So when you see a donation like that, you know there is a total stranger out there who believes in what you are doing, and who really wants to help.

How can the average reader help with the cause?

Megan: I think that's one of the things that sets up apart from other organizations, that a \$15 donation can really make a difference for a child.

Jess: In addition, anything you can do to get the word out is amazing. Tweeting, posting about it on Facebook, sending it to friends and family... anything you can do to raise the word about the cause. We didn't know this was an issue last May, so just letting people know that this is a problem -- and one that they can easily help with -- is a great start.

What would your advice be to someone who wanted to start a charitable project?

Jess: My advice would be that you need to work with other organizations. It's a much more efficient system if you build upon what others are doing. We have teamed up with many organizations who are working to rebuild schools or provide teacher training or school supplies. We can come in and compliment their efforts and provide the one thing that they're not. It's a really nice way to collaborate.

Megan: I think the other thing is to think about what *aid* means. Not only are we giving these children uniforms, but we're also having them made locally, which provides jobs for members of the community. We've been learning a lot about microfinance, and we've realized how important it is to help provide jobs and help the economy. The idea is not to constantly give to these developing nations -- it's to find a way to help them become sustainable.

Katy Kelleher is the Global Editor of [Milkshake](#). For more good news, sign up for our daily emails at [GetMilkshake.com](#), <http://www.getmilkshake.com/>.