

West Hawaii Today

Aid to Fanning Island

Isle resident responds to remote needs

by Carolyn Lucas

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Makua Lani Christian School students help sort and pack shoes donated to Pacific C.A.R.E. Missions, a nonprofit organization in Kailua-Kona that collects and delivers health care items, footwear and supplies for Pacific island countries. - Pacific C.A.R.E. Missions



Nearly 1,000 miles south of Hawaii, Fanning Island is one of the most remote places on Earth.

"It's so remote that, without help from outsiders, the people are basically left to die," said Rich Smith, a Kailua-Kona resident and director of the nonprofit Pacific C.A.R.E. Missions. "If you become ill or need urgent medical treatment, you see the Fanning Island nurses. If they cannot help, you have to wait for a sailboat or cargo vessel to take you to Christmas Island, where there is a doctor. If the Christmas Island doctor can't help, you must fly to Tarawa. If that doesn't work, then you go to Fiji where, if you're still alive, you can get an operation. It may take up to four months before you get the treatment you need."

There are no doctors on Fanning, Smith said. The typical life expectancy for the estimated 4,000 residents is age 50 and about 40 percent of children die before celebrating their first birthday.

Smith first visited the small atoll in the Republic of Kiribati in 2003 and learned about the lack of health care infrastructure from a bike vendor. He has visited Fanning 20 times since, providing residents medical supplies and equipment through Pacific C.A.R.E. Missions. The acronym stands for Compassionately Arranging Relief and Equipment.

Smith also goes every July on medical mission trips with South Carolina-based Mission of Hope Ministries to Samoa, where he delivers donated supplies, helps medical professionals with basic treatments and is certified to clean wounds. Whenever possible, he said his nonprofit tries to help Big Island residents and the homeless.

Smith gave a load of supplies, as well as donated postcards and T-shirts for fundraisers, to New Jersey resident Bill Liebiedz, a passenger aboard Holland America Cruise Line's Rotterdam -- seen Wednesday in Kailua Bay. Liebiedz volunteered to deliver the items when Smith couldn't get aboard the sold-out trip.

Throughout the year, Smith, a woodworker by trade, collects surplus and outdated medical supplies from Hawaii clinics, medical professionals and the public. Over the years, he has brought examination tables, gurneys, cabinets and construction materials to be used to build a Fanning medical clinic. Local businesses have also donated sunglasses and shoes.

"Normally, these outdated meds and replaced pieces of equipment are still very usable and many times near new. Sadly, many of these usable supplies are now in landfills," he said. "We have found there is a great need for these items in Third World Pacific Island countries where even a Band-Aid is rare and hard to find." Church groups and Makua Lani Christian School assist with sorting and packing. With the help of volunteers, cruise lines, sailboats, airlines and shipping companies, Smith personally delivers the supplies to the Fanning Island Council Donation Committee, which disperses the items between the seven villages. He follows up with Fanning's mayor to ensure the supplies are properly used and not sold for profit.

Getting to Fanning is a challenge. Smith said Norwegian Cruise Lines used to visit Fanning regularly as a part of its Hawaii trip itinerary, but discontinued it in April 2009 because of lost revenues. Since January, Holland America is the only cruise line voyaging to Fanning and the 30-day trip passenger costs about \$6,000 per passenger. When the vessel Smith is traveling on cannot reach Fanning because of weather or an emergency, he donates the items to other nearby islands, such as Moorea and Nuku Hiva.

To send a small container of supplies on a private boat costs \$1,000 but Holland America is allowing Smith to bring extra luggage, which is screened by security, for free, he said.

Pacific C.A.R.E. Missions relies upon donations. Monetary contributions are used to purchase supplies and pay for shipping unless a donor indicates otherwise. Smith spent between \$30,000 and \$40,000 last year to do this mission work.

Asked why his nonprofit helps other places when the need is great locally, Smith responded, "We need to be able to help anyone, no matter where they are. Many of the places we help because their government, community or family isn't. Many times we are learning had we not helped, that life would have been lost."



From left: Pacific C.A.R.E. Missions Director Rich Smith, Ken Bansemer and Rotterdam cruise ship passenger Bill Liebiedz, of New Jersey, inspect medical supplies Wednesday morning on Kailua Pier. The items were donated to Pacific C.A.R.E. Missions, which helps Pacific island countries. Smith gave them to Liebiedz, who is voluntarily delivering them to Fanning Island, a stop on his Hawaii and South Pacific trip. - Brad Ballesteros | Special To West Hawaii Today



A boy on Fanning Island smiles big after receiving donated shoes for his entire family. The footwear was collected and delivered by Pacific C.A.R.E. Missions. - Pacific C.A.R.E. Missions