

Walk a mile in my shoes

By Lauren Foster

Published: April 24 2007 03:00 | Last updated: April 24 2007 03:00

A few weeks ago, a container with about 25,000 pairs of donated shoes left the Soles4Souls warehouse in Alabama, bound for Togo in west Africa. Elsewhere, the Coalition to Salute America's Heroes saved a disabled Iraqi veteran from losing his home, while the Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York received a \$12.5m philanthropic gift to advance the field of personalised medicine.

The common thread between shoes, war veterans and genetics? Philanthropy.

"The role of philanthropy in our culture is exploding right now because people are so disenfranchised with the political system that they are viewing philanthropic donations as another way to vote on issues that are important for them," says Sean Stannard-Stockton, principal and director of tactical philanthropy at Ensemble Capital Management, an investment advisory.

Increasingly, public charities and private foundations are stepping in with social, cultural and educational services that are not provided by states or governments, or that have been scaled down.

Melissa Berman, president and chief executive of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, a non-profit consulting firm, says there is "a lot of impatience" in how the public sector is fulfilling its functions.

"We have, by and large in American society, lost our conviction that government is the place where solutions to social problems occur," she says. "From the time of the Reagan revolution forward, we have gravitated to the view it is the private sector that is going to create innovative and effective solutions. The only viable solution we now see is private enterprise and private philanthropic action so we look to it to solve problems."

Here are three organisations that provide solutions, from basic needs, such as financial and emotional support and shoes, to pioneering advances in medicine.

Coalition to Salute America's Heroes

The CSAH's mission is to help severely wounded and disabled veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq rebuild their lives. It works with service members with disabilities rated at 30 per cent or higher.

"There are so many guys coming back, the government can't catch every single one of them. So [for] the ones who fall between the cracks, we are here to be the pillow and make that fall not as hard as it usually would be and catch them before they hit rock bottom," says J.R. Martinez, who was wounded in Iraq in 2003 when the vehicle he was driving hit a landmine, leaving him with burns over 40 per cent of his body and severe inhalation damage. He is a spokesman for the non-profit group.

CSAH (www.saluteheroes.org) has given out more than \$4m in aid - raised from individuals and corporations - since it was founded in 2004. Services include building handicapped-accessible homes and adapting existing homes for veterans who use wheelchairs, providing mentors to help veterans plan their road to recovery, and offering emergency financial relief as a stop-gap for veterans struggling to pay bills.

"When you come back wounded, that is when the real battle begins because the war can be a two-, three-, four-, five-year war and that's it," says Mr Martinez. "But when you are faced with an injury, whether it is physical or mental, it is going to last for the rest of your life and your family is going to suffer from it and it is going to take you a lifetime to adapt and move on."

In November, CSAH will host its fourth annual "Road to Recovery" conference for 350 veterans and their

families. The all-expenses-paid, four-day get-together is an opportunity for the soldiers to meet job vendors and network with other, wounded and disabled comrades. The Department of Veteran Affairs will hold seminars on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) while the Department of Defence will host career forums.

"When you're a wounded guy you think you are the only one going through it and then you're in a room with 100 guys going through the same thing, or worse, it's very therapeutic to say: 'I'm not alone, and I'm going to make it,'" Mr Martinez says.

Soles4Souls

Paul Wilson, president of the world outreach division of Soles4Souls, says the non-profit organisation meets a basic human need: footwear. "Americans have 1.5bn pairs of shoes sitting idle in their closets. We connect people who have shoes with people who need shoes," he says.

A pair of shoes can stop a cycle of pain. "A lot of people are living in conditions where they don't have access to basic sanitation and clean water and it's very easy for them to get infections," Mr Wilson says. When people's feet are separated from contaminants on the ground, it can instantly change their quality of life.

At Soles4Souls (www.soles4souls.org), no need is too small. Mr Wilson recently dispatched a single pair of steel-toed boots to Trenton, New Jersey, and later shipped a container to Africa. "It energises me just as much to send one pair of boots to a guy who got a welding job but couldn't take it because he couldn't afford a pair of steel-toed boots as it does to send a container of 25,000 pairs to Togo," Mr Wilson says.

The charity works with domestic and international charities to identify people who need shoes. This month, for example, it sent waterproof Gore-tex boots to a group of men in Kenya who are digging 200ft wells - barefoot - as part of an initiative led by an organisation called Water For Kenya (www.waterforkenya.org).

Soles4Souls has distributed more than 2m pairs of shoes since 2004 when Wayne Elsey, a longtime footwear executive, orchestrated a nationwide shoe drive after the Asian tsunami. The result was more than 250,000 pairs of shoes. When Hurricane Katrina hit the gulf coast region in 2005, Mr Elsey assembled a team and launched KatrinaShoes.com. In 2006 the organisation was formally incorporated as Soles4Souls, a public charity.

The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies

Philanthropy has long been an impetus for improvements in healthcare, from John D. Rockefeller, whose money produced a yellow fever vaccine, to Bill and Melinda Gates, who are funding treatments for the "neglected diseases", such as tuberculosis and malaria, which mainly affect the developing world.

"In the context that philanthropy supports research, it is society's R&D arm," says Jeffrey Solomon, president of the ACBP, a global family of charitable foundations. "Philanthropy is also society's Band-Aid. Very often, when the other elements of society - the economy, family, government and religion - don't work, it is up to philanthropy to provide the safety net."

This month the field of "personalised medicine", in which drugs and diets may be tailored to an individual's genes, received a boost when the ACBP gifted \$12.5m to the Mount Sinai Medical Center, providing seed funding for its new Center for Personalised Medicine.

"Personalised medicine could be the most important scientific development of the 21st century," says Charles Bronfman, former co-chair of Seagram, the distiller, and chairman of the ACBP. "In an industry like medicine, where market forces are slow to change, philanthropy must play the role of catalyst - facilitating growth, inspiring awareness, and serving as a basis for change."

The ACBP is committed to what it calls "investing in next generations" and sees personalised medicine as part of that. "This is not an investment that will pay immediate dividends, and very much fits in with our risk tolerance as this kind of investment is risky," says Mr Solomon. "Since its inception, the ACBP [has] emphasised innovation and new business models as a core component in its grant-making decisions."