

Old Shoes Bring a Smile to Africa

Naoko Takahashi, the winner of the women's marathon at the Sydney Olympics, is one of the key members of SMILE AFRICA, a project that involves

sending shoes that Japanese children have outgrown to children in Africa who don't have shoes or can't afford to buy them.

The project got underway in 2009, after the Kenyan athlete Douglas Wakihuri, the silver medalist in the men's marathon at the Seoul Olympics and a key figure in the corporate athletics scene in Japan, spoke to his friend Kazumi Oguro, editor of the monthly Japanese magazine *SOTO-KOTO*, about providing assistance for people living in slums in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi.

The biggest issue in implementing the project was how to collect shoes in Japan. The person chosen to address that issue was Naoko Takahashi. Having just retired, she was particularly busy with her new circumstances when the organizers first contacted her. Nonetheless, she readily agreed to take part, commenting, "I've always wanted to do my bit to give something back to society, but I never knew what I could actually do, so count me in!"

In May 2009, Takahashi visited the Kenyan slums in person, taking shoes collected in Japan with her. She was shocked by the sight of children who had



Naoko Takahashi helps fit a Kenyan boy with a pair of used running shoes.



SMILE AFRICA leaders Naoko Takahashi and Douglas Wakiihuri stand among a throng of children in a Nairobi slum.



BOTH PHOTOS MASARU SUZUKI

lost their toes after running around barefoot in areas littered with animal feces and picking up bacterial infections through sores in their feet.

“That sort of thing could be prevented if only the children had shoes to wear. As so many of my rivals came from Kenya, I could hardly believe that children there were living in such conditions,” recalls Takahashi. “As a marathon runner, I have always thought of shoes as a tool to enable me to run. For those children, shoes could actually save their lives.”

Since returning to Japan, Takahashi has made sure that she talks about the SMILE AFRICA Project every time she takes part in public marathons as a guest athlete. She also goes out to visit elementary schools taking part in the project to tell them about condi-

tions in Kenya and encourage them to donate their old shoes.

There is one thing in particular that Takahashi hopes to get across to children in Japan via this project. “When we’re young, we get new shoes every time we outgrow the old ones. That’s just the way it is. In other parts of the world however, there are people who have to walk around barefoot because they can’t even afford to buy one pair of shoes, let alone new pairs. I think we should all be more thankful for the things that we take for granted and make the most of everything we have.”

As of the end of January 2011, a total of 24,464 pairs of shoes had been sent over to Africa as part of the SMILE AFRICA Project.