

MISSOURIAN

Mel West's honorary doctorate recognizes a lifetime of humanitarian service

By Julia Hansen
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Mel West carries a bag of milk cartons into Mobility Worldwide's warehouse April 16 in Columbia. The organization uses the bottles as packaging materials since it doesn't pay for packaging.

Three days short of his 95th birthday, Columbia pastor Mel West will be honored Saturday by MU for his lifelong commitment to humanitarian work. He will receive an honorary degree along with anti-apartheid leader Albie Sachs during the morning Honors Ceremony in Mizzou Arena.

West, a retired Methodist minister, is perhaps best known as the founder of Mobility Worldwide, which supplies wheeled carts for the disabled in developing nations. Former President Jimmy Carter was one of six notable people who nominated West for the honorary degree.

In his nomination letter, Carter wrote: "From his humble Dust Bowl beginnings, Mel West has never lost sight of the integral need for humanity. His lifetime of service to others through kindness, respect, faith education, inspiration, and donations of time, materials and money well-qualify Mel as a recipient of an honorary doctorate."

Marshall Stewart, vice chancellor for extension and engagement at MU, praised West's contributions to Columbia and the world in his nomination letter.

"Mr. West's ethos is 'when the line of human need crosses the line of my ability to respond, then I have a responsibility to do so.' This guiding principle has forged his enormous accomplishments for the good of others," Stewart wrote.

PET Project

After the age when most people retire, West, then 70, was busy building mobility carts and shipping them to Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe and other regions.

In 1994, a missionary in what was then Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, made West aware of the need for sturdy, hand-cranked, three-wheel wooden wheelchairs to navigate difficult terrain. Following that suggestion, the mobility carts were developed and named Person Energy Transportation or PETs.

Twenty-five years later, the PETs are still built, assembled and packaged by volunteers at 29 affiliate locations. Columbia's affiliate alone has 200 volunteers and just two paid staff members, yet they turn out 35 PETs per week.

The PETs are then shipped around the world to people who have typically been disabled by polio, birth defects or land mines. The organization's mission is "to provide appropriate mobility for all of God's children in need," giving first to those with the greatest need.

When West first learned of the need for carts, he partnered with Earl Miner who helped design them. After a year of testing different prototypes, the two picked the best one and sent it to Zaire with instructions to test it in the worst place possible.

Larry Hills, the missionary in Zaire, sent back this message: “This is just what we need, so let’s go for it.” After Hills confirmed that the PETs would work, West set to work producing them. The operation began in his garage, and the PETs were stored in a local church until Mobility Worldwide outgrew that location. The operation moved to Paris Road in 2006.

Today, three different sizes of mobility carts are assembled: adult, youth and the pull PET. Once assembled and shipped, the PETs are distributed through nongovernmental organizations working in the areas where needed.

“We had no business trying to distribute,” West said. “NGOs were already there, knew the people and their problems. We let the NGOs know what we had and how we could work with them.”

After receiving a PET, West said the recipient usually has a series of three reactions. First, “the pure joy of mobility.” Next, “Why would someone do this for me?” And finally, “How can I use this to make a living or pay back my support system?”

Most often, West said, the cart becomes both a transportation device and a vehicle, so recipients can start a business to sell items they make, such as bread or other goods.

Mobilizing service

Before attending seminary, West ran a dairy farm in Carthage and served as pastor on a circuit to five rural churches. One day, a missionary from India visited one of his churches and suggested that he consider full-time ministry.

West uprooted his family of four and moved to Dallas to attend the PERKINS School of Theology at Southern Methodist University.



President Jimmy Carter was one of six people who nominated West for the honorary degree. Carter is pictured here with Sam Singer, E.AL/W. GA Affiliate

Immediately after seminary in 1965, West was appointed to the Office of Creative Ministries where he worked with 1,260 congregations across Missouri. His role was to involve Methodist churches in outreach ministries, such as youth groups that repaired housing for low-income elderly residents.

"It doesn't matter a heck of a lot what we say we believe," West said. "We can say all the creeds we want, but until we put that into action, it doesn't mean anything to people."

"I took the idea and produced the PET, but it would not have happened if they hadn't asked for it," West said.

Built on volunteers

Most of the PET volunteers are retired. Roger Hofmeister, a family doctor, began volunteering after he retired in 1996. "I needed something to do besides hit a golf ball in retirement," he said.

Hofmeister has spent 20 years volunteering for PET, first as a shop manager and volunteer coordinator. Now, he's part of the international board, which helps with fundraising and quality control, and he encourages volunteers to go on as many distribution trips as possible. "Our best salesmen are people who have been on distribution," Hofmeister said.

One such volunteer is Warren Zahler, a 16-year veteran of the organization who found Mobility Worldwide when his wife mentioned a newspaper article she had seen.

While on a distribution trip to Guatemala, Zahler's wife noticed a man crawling toward the market square and notified the leader of their group. That leader found the man, who was 55 at that time, and discovered that he had polio when he was 5. That trip has reinforced Zahler's desire to get people off the ground.

"If you can't get around, you're stigmatized. Your family has to take care of you," he said. "You don't have any dignity."

"As a physician, the only thing I can think of that is as immediately life-changing are the cataract camps," Hofmeister said. Snapping his fingers, he said, "PET changes a life just like that."

West stepped away from heading Mobility Worldwide about three years ago and is now the director emeritus.

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