

# Lexington resident brings dolls, smiles to orphans in Africa



*'Dolls for Zambia' creator Ruth Litchfield of Lexington kneels next to a child and her doll during a recent trip to Zambia. Litchfield has traveled to the African nation for the last four years to distribute hand-knitted dolls to orphaned children in the area.*

**By Samantha Allen/Wicked Local Lexington**  
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Lexington —

Lexington resident Ruth Litchfield never imagined she would be so moved when she traveled to Zambia four years ago. The first time she went with [Communities Without Borders](#), (CWB) and since then she has been sponsored by her parish, [Pilgrim Congregational Church](#) on CWB trips.

“I had been wanting to do something for children in Africa for many years and I often said, ‘I don’t have a gazillion dollars and that wouldn’t even help,’” said Litchfield, a teacher at Bridge Elementary School. “I figured if I could just go and hold an orphan and let them know somebody cared, that would help.”

But her work proved to be more involved than that. Upon her return to a small school for Zambian orphans the next year, she brought with her several hand-knitted dolls – simple rectangular dolls spun from yarn with little arms and legs wrapped in a flurry of bright colors. For an American child, perhaps they would seem old-fashioned or boring. For an orphan with little else to compare them to, Litchfield described their significance.

“It’s just a big treasure to them,” she explained. “It’s the only thing they have. They hug them like they’re hugging us to say thank you. They hold out their hands waiting for one.”

Litchfield said the knitting became infectious for her, but the practice began to catch on in the community as well. As she began to knit around Lexington, people began to inquire. She called the project, “Dolls for Zambia.” “Just by my knitting them and people seeing them it sort of spread ... I always have pictures, [too], so it brings about conversation,” Litchfield said. She said once someone even wanted to buy one.

“I’m very possessive ... I say, ‘Sorry, they’re not for sale.’ I know exactly where they’re going,” she said. This year, Litchfield said she will have hundreds of dolls to bring as people continue to volunteer to help out, including the participation of a local Girl Scout troop. Marita Hartshorn, who volunteers with the Lexington Girl Scouts and has lived in town for 35 years, said she is proud to have her kids helping out, creating the bodies for the dolls. Then some of her local friends knit the finishing touches.

“I’m running it sort of like an assembly line,” she said, adding she plans to have 60 by the time Litchfield takes off. “When I’m knitting, I think of the kids, and how they might have some comfort.” Eleanor Smith, who found out about Dolls for Zambia through Pilgrim Congregational, said she is filled with happiness to know her knitting is helping others. “It’s good to know my yarn is going some place useful,” she said. “It makes me feel good. I just wish we could do enough for our own country.” Litchfield said she is incredibly humbled by the generosity of her community. Last year, the Girl Scouts surprised her with a special 50-doll delivery just days before her flight. This year, she is anxiously anticipating visiting the country, knowing she has enough for everyone of the school children this time. “It’s such a small thing we’re doing and they have so little, their smiles, their joy, their dance, just blows you away,” she said. “Once you’ve been around these orphans and you’ve seen their unbelievable smiles and happy faces, it just grabs your heart.”