

STUDENT READING

Teen’s Project Turns Her Into “The Bag Lady” *Capital Times* (Madison, WI). June 20,1996.

With her red hair and diminutive stature, Heidi Rieser might bring Little Orphan Annie to mind. But what the 14-year-old Verona (WI) girl has done to raise nearly \$4,500 to go on a trip across the globe is more along the lines of Daddy Warbucks.

Heidi is in the air today en route to Auckland, New Zealand for the start of an adventure there and in Australia. She’s a student ambassador with People to People, an international exchange program that started during the Eisenhower administration.

When she returns home on July 8, Heidi will have gained far more than new friends and knowledge of the culture and people of two faraway countries. She’ll also have gained new insight into herself and a host of skills that will serve her the rest of her life. And that’s a process that started last fall when she first learned about the group and the trip.

Heidi and her mother, Sue Matoy-Rieser, were somewhat stunned last fall when the first meeting about the trip confronted them with the cost of \$4,500.

“Mom, that’s a lot of money,” Heidi said as they left. “You can’t just give me that money.”

“We couldn’t just hand her \$4,500 – that’s not appropriate,” agreed Matoy-Rieser, a parent of three girls with her husband, Bob Rieser.

But that didn’t stop Heidi.

“I can do that,” she told her mom, referring to raising the \$4,500. After hearing about the fun time her cousin had as an exchange student in New Zealand, Heidi wanted to make the trip. But deep down she doubted whether she could pull it off.

“I knew it was a lot of money and I didn’t think I’d be able to raise it,” She admits.

Mom concedes she had the same thoughts. “I didn’t think she could raise that much money,” Matoy-Rieser says with a smile. “I though maybe she would raise \$500. But she was determined.”

The problem was finding something that could earn her money. Heidi, who will be a freshman at Verona High School this fall, had gotten involved in crafts a few months before through Arlys Milles, a family friend who “kind of took Heidi under her wing and mentored her,” her mother says.

A talented seamstress with a perfectionist streak, Heidi had a skill one could turn into a business. But she needed a marketable product. Then her grandmother, Helen Matoy, gave her the idea of making classy fabric bags for wine bottles. With the Christmas season coming up, the market was people who go to parties with a bottle of wine. Surely they would appreciate a nice covering for their gifts to their party hosts, Heidi and her supporters reasoned. “So I cut out a few,” Heidi says, “And I decided they were a little too big. So I made some more and decided to put cards with them”

She later dropped the cards and added a drawstring at the top.

“They’re not very hard (to make),” she says. “They only take a few minutes.”

The first one sold around Thanksgiving. And it snowballed from there. At last count, Heidi had sold more than 2,000 at \$2.50 each (\$2.25 each for orders of 50 or more) to individuals, liquor stores and craft shops. A key helper was Stephanie Edwards, an assistant principal at Verona Area Middle School.

“She saw them and wanted to put them up in school so teachers could buy them,” Heidi says. “And then she called my parents one day and said, ‘Can I take Heidi to liquor stores to sell them?’” Her parents agreed. “So she took me to the liquor stores and said, ‘This is Heidi, she’s a really good kid. Take it away Heidi.’ And I would.”

But it wasn’t as easy as it sounds.

“The hardest part was that I didn’t want to go into the liquor stores at first,” Heidi says. “I was kind of scared. Then after a couple of times – now I go in all the time and they know me as ‘Heidi the bag lady.’”

While she got the brush-off at a couple of stores – “I learned that not everybody wants stuff,” she says – others embraced her product. The Wine Boutique even called and asked to sell her bags. She also sells them to the Spurgeon Vineyards & Winery in Highland and has had good responses from other wineries, though they couldn’t sell her bags due to contracts with other suppliers.

When the wine bag market died down after Christmas, a friend of her grandmother’s gave her the idea of crayon bags, which have become her biggest money maker. The fabric bags hold a coloring book and several crayons. Hundreds have been sold, many through JB’s Art and Craft Mall. She also makes all-purpose carrying bags with handles, is making an order of 100 small jewelry bags for a Florida jeweler and has a Verona teacher who wants 150 carrying bags made out of fabric depicting cows for a convention coming to town. She’s even branched out into “Kiddie Cabanas,” indoor fabric tents meant to be hiding/play places for young children. She’s sold about 10 of those at \$39.95 each.

Now she sits just a few hundred dollars from her goal; her grandmother loaned her the remaining money, which she’ll pay back out of future sales. So today she is one of about 30 southern Wisconsin kids heading for the adventure of a lifetime.

“We’re going to do some marine biology work with the Great Barrier Reef,” Heidi says. “And we’re going to work with the Maori Indians of New Zealand. I’m excited but I don’t think it’s set in yet.”

When she returns Heidi plans to pick up where she left off.

“I have a lot of ideas,” she says. “More ideas than I have time to do anything more.”

And while she says she has her heart set on being a teacher someday, there are always those weeks off in the summer to be a business mogul.

“My goal is hopefully to help kids who are in my situation,” says Heidi, who donated two bags to a local auction. “And another goal is to be in Madison Magazine as Entrepreneur of the Year. And I want to save money for college.”

She’s already gotten a heck of an education though.

“I’ve learned that if I put my mind to it, I can do whatever I want to do and accomplish what I want to accomplish,” she says confidently. Her mother marvels at the change in her daughter.

“Heidi doesn’t like to hear me say this, but I think it has changed her,” Matoy-Rieser says. “She was very shy. And not that she had poor self-esteem, but she’s a different kid now. She’s not afraid to walk up to people and talk to them. There’s a big difference in the confidence level.”

It’s been a big payoff, far bigger than the Riesers would have gotten if they had just written out a check for the trip – or told Heidi to forget it.

“A lot of parents may have just outright said no, not realizing that if the kids wanted it bad enough they could get it,” Matoy-Rieser says. “I think she’ll appreciate the trip a lot more. I think she’ll try harder to meet people, to see things and to try things she wouldn’t have otherwise.”