

Abhijit Roy and six colleagues from SpecSavers took 4,600 pairs of second-hand spectacles to Gyetiase last August. While they were working there, fifty cataract operations were carried out, also funded by SpecSavers.

The stuttering recovery and lengthening shadow of government spending cuts make the high street a joyless place for many businesses right now. Yet at times like this we should count our blessings. Many can only dream of the things that we take for granted –like basic eye care.

Charity spectacle recycling schemes are not new and many optical professionals have volunteered their help in developing countries. Running a high street retail business is busy enough without seeking extra challenges –yet that’s exactly what we seem to do. Why? Probably for the same reason we entered the profession: to help people. And nowhere does our time go further than in sub-Saharan Africa.

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Seven of us from SpecSavers in Hinckley, Leicester and Tonbridge enrolled in the Ashanti Development, collecting second-hand spectacles to take to villages in Ghana’s region of the same name. The first challenge was to arrange optometry cover for the duration of the trip, which proved trickier than expected. But once we were committed there was no turning back. What we hadn’t anticipated were customers’ reactions to our appeal for unwanted spectacles. They were amazed at our plans and genuinely interested in our experiences when we returned. Vicky, our lab tech, was told how good it felt to be giving business to a company that was giving something back. Some seemed surprised that a major high street retailer was getting involved, NGO-style, on the ground. It certainly didn’t fit with their idea of corporate culture.

And to answer the question: yes, spectacle recycling brought more people in through the door. It seems that glasses, even when old, obsolete or very unfashionable, have an inherent value that stops us from dropping them in the waste bin. Spectacles mean more than metal, plastic and glass, even in our consumer culture. They are still one of the most personal possessions and part of an individual's quality of life – something that customers instinctively want to donate, rather than discard. Collecting and storing 4,500 pairs of glasses was no small task, but hauling them to Africa in your luggage was no picnic either. Yet what really seemed to capture customers' imaginations was the mundane details of conveying them from a Leicestershire high street to a needy and grateful Ghanaian.

Our Ashanti experiences were unforgettable: polite, pre-dawn queues, endless smiles and always a 'God bless you.' It was worth it for any of the memorable moments – like witnessing a grandfather seeing his granddaughter's face for the first time. The unexpected bonus was that we returned feeling energised – and it was good for business.

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Ashanti Development's tree-planting project is doing well with about 98 per cent success rate. It provides for children in their last three years of school to be given a tree to plant and look after, with prizes or certificates for those who do best.

The scheme has recently been adopted by the District, with the aim of spreading it to all schools in Sekyere Central.



The photo above shows two pens and a pencil being given to one of the children who took good care of his tree.

Microcredit

We are very grateful to Kitchen Table Charities Trust, the charity set up by John Humphrys 'charity for a grant of £5,600 to spend on our microcredit project.

A Dream of Africa Gala Evening

Profits from A Dream of Africa, the third Gala evening performed for Ashanti Development by dancers and musicians from the Royal Ballet, amounted to £1,800. If you'd like to see a review and some pictures, follow this link: <http://bit.ly/bwdSw7>

Please help

We're looking for a UK-based volunteer to help with publicity. If you know anyone, please let us know.