

Brother Dealer Values Community Outreach — An Important Part of any Business Plan

For Louisiana sewing machine dealer John Douthat, running a business and making a difference in community outreach require the same skills: focus and forethought. These skills have helped Douthat grow AllBrands into one of the largest U.S. sewing machine dealerships for Brother International Corporation—with six showrooms throughout Louisiana. And that's also how Douthat and his wife, Annette, have provided decades of support for programs that teach sewing as a life skill and help participants develop income potential through sewing.

The Douthats started AllBrands (www.allbrands.com) more than 35 years ago, building it into a leading source of sewing machines, vacuums and appliances. They've been strong supporters of many community outreach programs, including the National 4-H Foundation, a youth organization that teaches life and leadership skills, as well as personal development. Through both the 4-H and the Louisiana State University, AllBrands has donated more than 1,100 sewing machines (as well as accessories and supplies), and has spent time every year judging and providing awards for state 4-H sewing competitions.

Donations of machinery obviously create more sewing enthusiasts and help forge strong community bonds. And sometimes such donations help ease inventory overages that can occur with large dealerships, says Douthat. What really counts, though, is supporting an effort that helps build sewing into people's lives.

"We feel like 4-H is doing a fine job of teaching young people sewing skills...much better than public school home ec classes, because they get more intensive training and can envision more useful, complex applications," Douthat says. "We're just in love with 4-H."

AllBrands' most recent charitable partner is the Sewing Machine Project (SMP), founded and led by



AllBrands Store.

freelance sewing machine educator Margaret Jankowski of Madison, Wisconsin. SMP was formed in 2005 to collect donated new and used sewing machines for communities that have suffered from natural disasters—what the group's slogan eloquently describes as "mending communities, one sewing machine at a time." The machines aid in small business development and offer creative growth and community service. Since 2005, more than 650 sewing machines have been distributed. The group is also developing a sewing education aspect to add to its services.

Douthat says he got excited about SMP after watching a video clip on its website (www.thesewingmachineproject.org), where Jankowski explained why she felt donations of sewing machines would make a difference for schools and businesses in the Gulf Coast struggling to recover from Hurricane Katrina.

"I watched the whole clip and said 'Hey, she's on the right track, and we need to support her in the distribution effort,'" he says.



Setting up machines and training teachers in the New Orleans center community room.

Since then, all six AllBrands locations are now SMP collection sites, and the dealership has also donated shipping assistance, dock space, warehouse space and 15 Brother LS-2125i machines for one of SMP's most recent projects—setting up a sewing classroom for the Adams Street Cultural Development Center, which is housed in a restored 100-year-old building (a former crack house) in New Orleans. During the afternoon of Memorial Day, Douthat and Jankowski joined Dr. Rodney Wooten and Anna Morgan (who partnered to found the center) to help them set up the donated Brother machines.

Douthat says he has always preferred to channel AllBrands' charitable outreach through 501(c)(3) organizations because he figures they know what they're doing and how to get the best use of the donations. "Rather than trying to do things independently as dealers and manufacturers, I think it's better to work through a group that knows what its doing," he says. He is actively spreading the word to his fellow dealers about SMP's mission and needs.

AllBrands' second major machine donation to SMP was 100 factory-sealed Brother machines, mostly XL-3030s and XL-3027s, which are destined for the earthquake-torn nation of Haiti. This donation came about in part because of a direct AllBrands connection. "I needed to get involved in Haiti because I've got a customer down there!" Douthat says. And right after the earthquake occurred, he tried without success to reach her and offer assistance. So he turned to SMP instead, asking Jankowski how many machines her "wish list" might include. As of early June, the machines were in Miami, awaiting shipment, but both Jankowski and Douthat are confident the

machines will soon be on the ground in Haiti and in use.

What really piqued Douthat's interest, though, was learning that 60% of Haiti's exports were sewn products, and that after the earthquake, the garment industry was the first business to start back up. Douthat thinks this might be the key to this nation's recovery. "Haiti *needs* to get back into the sewing trade," he says.

Whether it's 4-H or SMP or some other program, one constant for Douthat's community outreach is his choice of Brother machinery for his donations.

"Our donations over the years have been Brother machines because they are lightweight and the easiest for sewers of all ages to learn, operate and use," Douthat says.

And although the machines donated for Haiti may still be working their way onto the island nation, Douthat is already working on other ideas to help SMP spread the sewing love into Haiti and other areas where, literally, a community needs some mending.

"The more people involved with SMP, the better off we are," he says.



Louisiana 4-H students with John and Annette Douthat in front of a pallet of Brother sewing machines going to extension agents across the state

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