

HE SUPPLIES TOOLS FOR TEACHERS

"I just want to help," says Mika (in Buffalo with teachers Amber Barry, left, and Kathy Sider).



JOHN MIKA, 58
Buffalo

In 2008 retired autoworker John Mika started the first day of his new job as a substitute teacher in Buffalo by asking his third graders to take out their pencils for a writing assignment. To his surprise only 3 of the 27 students had pencils. "Nobody had paper, either," says Mika. "These kids were struggling."

When he checked the teacher's desk, he found a box of pencils the teacher had purchased herself for the youngsters. That got him thinking: What if he could provide free supplies to teachers at the poorest schools, many of whom spend hundreds of dollars a year out of their own pockets for supplies?

Three years later Mika opened the Teacher's Desk in a donated warehouse. Set up like an office supply store, the nonprofit venture allows teachers from area schools to shop free for donated supplies, including pencils, paper, glue and books. Mika has provided \$374,000 in supplies to 1,247 teachers since October 2011. And, says fifth-grade teacher Amber Berry, who used to spend \$500 a year on supplies, the benefits go far beyond saving money. "It's like someone has given us teachers the hug we need."

By Kristin Harmel

JOHN'S WISH LIST



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