

TIME



PAIGE MYCOSKIE (2)

GIVING BACK

A Shoe That Fits So Many Souls

For each pair of Toms sold, the company gives one away to a child in need

By NADIA MUSTAFA

BLAKE MYCOSKIE WANTED to get away from it all. After founding and running four businesses and losing by a sliver on *The Amazing Race*, he escaped last January to Argentina, where he learned to sail, dance the tango and play competitive polo. He also visited impoverished villages where few, if any, children had shoes. "I was sitting on a field on a farm one day, and I had an epiphany," says Mycoskie, who had taken to wearing *alpargatas*—resilient, lightweight slip-on shoes with a breathable canvas top and soft leather insole traditionally worn by Argentine workers. "I said, I'm going to start a shoe company, and for every pair I sell, I'm going to give one pair to a kid in need."

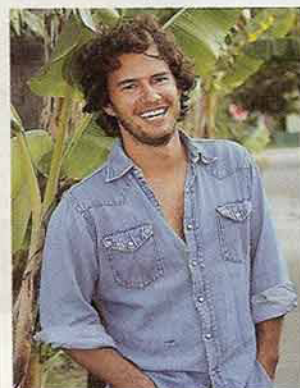
He spent the next two months meeting with shoe-

and fabricmakers in Argentina and named his self-financed company Toms: Shoes for Tomorrow. He modeled his product after the *alpargata* but used brighter colors and different materials. "No one looked twice at *alpargatas*, but I thought they had a really cool style," says Mycoskie, 30. "I'm a fan of Vans, but they can be clunky and sweaty. These aren't. They fit your foot like a glove but are sturdy enough for a hike, the beach or the city."

A Texan who religiously reads biographies of the likes of Sam Walton, Ted Turner and Richard Branson yet ends his e-mail messages, "DISCLAIMER: you will not win the rat race wearing Toms," Mycoskie had never worked in fashion. With a staff of seven full-time employees (including former Trovata designer John Whitedge), six sales reps and

eight interns, he debuted a collection last June of 15 styles for men and women, as well as limited-edition artist versions. They quickly found their way into stores like American Rag and Fred Segal in Los Angeles, where Toms is based, and Scoop in New York City. By the fall he had sold 10,000 pairs, averaging \$38 each, online and in 40 stores.

So, as promised, he returned to Argentina in October with a couple of dozen



INSPIRED Mycoskie based the Toms shoe, left, on *alpargatas*

THE OTHER FEET Argentine children outfitted in Toms shoes

volunteers to give away 10,000 pairs of Toms shoes along 2,200 miles of countryside. "I always thought I'd spend the first half of my life making money and the second half giving it away," says Mycoskie, who calls himself not CEO but chief shoe giver. "I never thought I could do both at the same time."

Not that he's turning a profit. "Selling online has allowed us to grow pretty rapidly, but we're not going to make as much as another shoe company, and the margins are definitely lower," he admits. "But what we do helps us get publicity. Lots of companies give a percentage of their revenue to charity, but we can't find anyone who matches one for one."

Toms already has orders from 300 stores, including Nordstrom, Urban Outfitters and Bloomingdale's, for 41,000 pairs from its spring and summer collections, and it will be entering Australia, Japan, Canada, Spain and France this summer. The company will introduce a line of children's shoes called Tiny Toms in May and will unveil a pair of leather shoes in the fall.

Mycoskie is planning a second shoe drop in Argentina later this year, with more to follow in Africa and Asia. He says 240 customers have told him they would pay to volunteer on shoe drops, so next year he hopes to launch a company offering \$2,000 vacations consisting of two days of sightseeing and four days of volunteering. "All these other businesses and deals have been preparing me for this," he says. "I believe Toms is going to give away millions of shoes one day."



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