

## Seedlr Spotlight: The Joy of Sox®

From small towns to the largest cities, chances are you've encountered the homeless. Maybe you've seen them sleeping on benches, or waiting in line at shelters, or even right at the end of your block. They might ask you for food or spare change, and regardless of if you help them out or not, it's always an uncomfortable feeling.

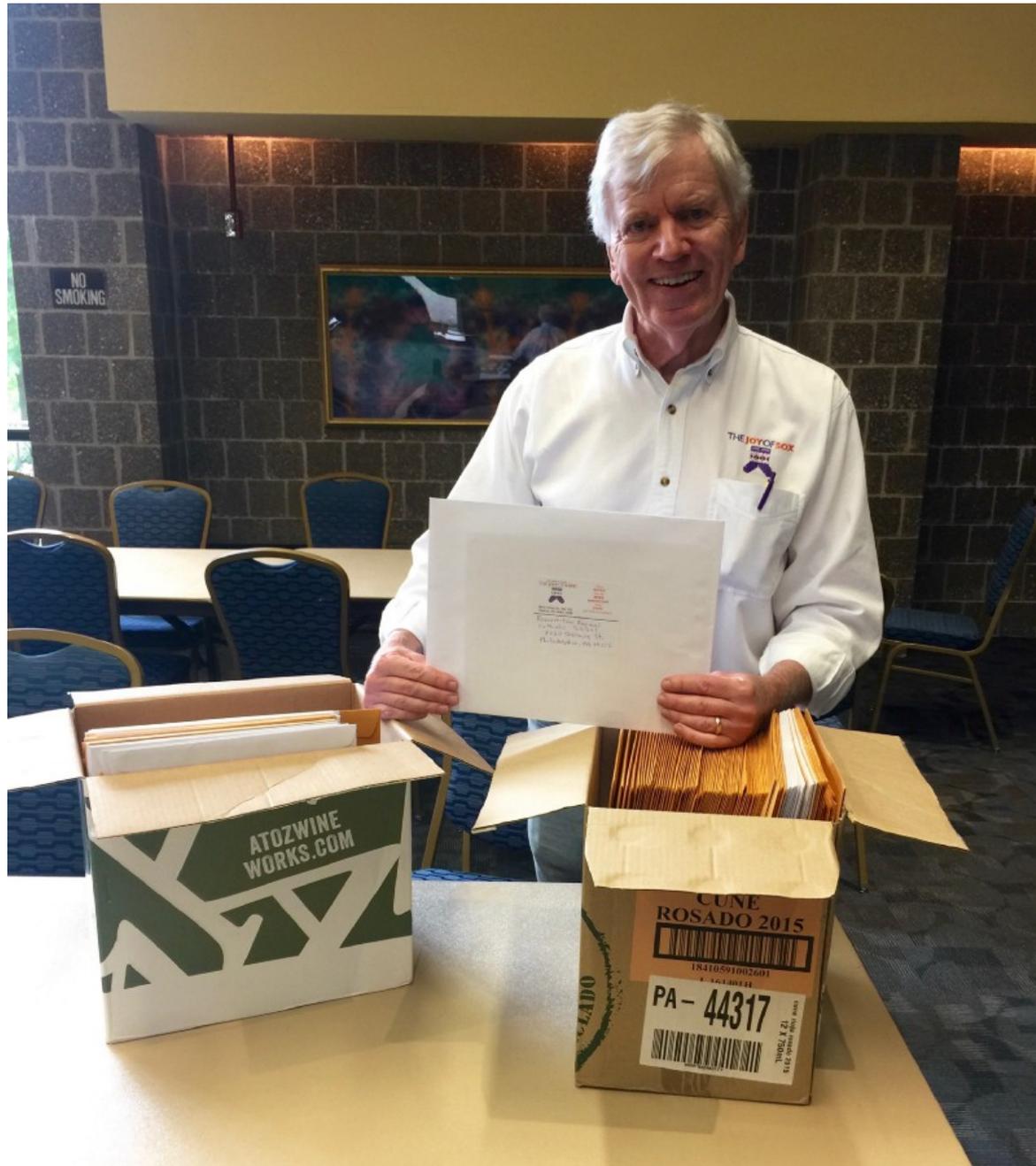
You're used to the homeless asking for money or food. Sometimes they seem truly in need. Sometimes not so much. But **Tom Costello Jr.**, Founder and CEO of **Joy of Sox®**, has made it his mission to focus on another dire need of homeless communities around the country—clean socks.

You've probably never thought about your socks. That would quickly change if you were ever living on the street. As the weather turns cold, constant foot discomfort can even turn deadly, with frostbite a very real possibility. Hygiene is another issue, as walking around barefoot can lead to injury or infection.

The goal of getting clean socks to the homeless is an important one. That's why the Joy of Sox organization has become such a success—it continues to fill that need, expanding to **29 states** and contributing over **200,000 pairs of socks** to the homeless around the country. Tom has dedicated his days to making sure that his nonprofit organization will only continue to grow larger. It's surprising, then, to discover that the self-described "Chief Sockperson" behind Joy of Sox wasn't always so fond of the homeless...

"Believe it or not, I was homeless-phobic. I would avoid [the homeless]. I was afraid of them," said Tom, as he recounted the origin of his passion for socks for the homeless. At the time, Tom was an adjunct professor in Management and Entrepreneurial Studies at Chestnut Hill College, located just outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. With a degree in Engineering from Villanova University and an MBA from Widener University, Tom had no background in social or nonprofit work.

When his wife volunteered at a local soup kitchen, Tom decided to work up the nerve to join her. So Tom went with her...and promptly had an anxiety attack. He remained “homelessphobic” for several more years, until his attitude changed.



Tom Costello, Jr., “Chief Sockperson” of Joy of Sox®

“I realized it’s important to do something that scares you,” said Tom, who believed that his fear of the homeless was irrational and something that could be overcome face-to-face. As a volunteer at shelters, his wife had told him about the requests for clean socks from the homeless people she encountered. So in 2010, Tom went back to a homeless shelter to try again, this time armed with brand-new socks. He began handing them out, and what happened then became the spark that led to the Joy of Sox.

“I remember giving a specific homeless woman a pair of socks, and she had then asked me for another pair, for someone else she knew,” said

Tom. “She said, ‘nobody’s given me a pair of socks before,’ and she started to cry. She gave me a hug, and I hugged her back. That was the first time I had ever touched a homeless person.”

This, as Tom describes it, was his “epiphany moment.” The moment that he realized that all around the country, there was a large unmet need for socks for the homeless. It was then and there that Tom decided to devote himself to an organization that would fulfill that exact need. It was at that moment that the idea for Joy of Sox was born.

From then on, it was full-steam ahead. It was 2011, and Tom was still teaching at Chestnut Hill College. He was also organizing a sock drive. With the help of student volunteers, they were able to hand out enough socks that day to earn coverage from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. What happened next was even more amazing.

“The story was picked up from [the *Inquirer*] and then we had coverage from the *Huffington Post*, and *NBC* wanted to do a live piece on us,” said Tom. After that, donations of new sock packages began flooding in, and organizations in 16 states requested information about how they could organize their own local sock drives.

Tom realized then that this was an idea that was bigger than weekend sock drives. This was an idea that required a larger platform. That would be Joy of Sox, the nonprofit organization.

“I came up with the name the Joy of Sox after the famous book *The Joy of Sex*, from the 1970s,” said Tom. He got to work filing the appropriate paperwork to found a full-scale nonprofit organization. That involved registering with the state of Pennsylvania and filing a 501(c)(3) form for tax-exempt status with the IRS. It was a process that took about four months.

“I was afraid of [the homeless].”

With the legal paperwork in place, the Joy of Sox was a full-fledged nonprofit organization. Like any organization just starting out, Tom had to experiment with a variety of tactics and exercises to grow the organization, to varying levels of success.

Expanding as an organization often means starting local. Every year, Villanova University organizes a campus event for charity, known as the

St. Thomas Day of Service. Tom reached out to the university and suggested a sock drive as an event for the community.

“The Villanova Women’s Field Hockey team sent out letters to 197 schools in the Philadelphia area, suggesting a sock drive as a possible community service project,” said Tom. Each letter also included a handwritten note from the student sending it, thanking the recipient for the consideration of holding a sock drive at his or her school. The student volunteers’ hard work paid off—between 20 and 30 thousand pairs of socks were donated as a result of the campaign. While organizing local events remains a crucial part of Tom’s efforts, social media is a part of a startup nonprofit’s arsenal that cannot be overlooked.

“Most of our growth has been through social media,” noted Tom. In addition to an official organization website, the Joy of Sox relies heavily on Facebook for furthering its mission. To this end, Tom has had much success “getting the word out” about Joy of Sox. He recounts a story about a time early on in the Joy of Sox’s development when he posted on the organization’s Facebook wall, asking all the page’s fans to volunteer at an upcoming sock drive.

The results were inspiring—not only did complete strangers show up at the drive, but one volunteer even supplied a truck to use for transportation of the donated socks.



Tom Costello, Jr. (left), organizing a sock drive on-site at a shelter

*“It’s important to do something that scares you.”*

Not every approach was as successful, however.

“I’ve tried Facebook advertising, where it’s like \$40 for 8,000 people to see [Joy of Sox’s] message, but I haven’t really gotten long-term, quality volunteers or donations from it,” said Tom.

That’s a common tale in this kind of business. For every leap forward, there are certain to be many more hurdles. Starting a small business, especially in the nonprofit space, is notoriously difficult. And Tom’s seen his fair share of hurdles, some of which are a constant challenge.

“It’s a continual problem of having enough funds raised to keep the organization running,” stated Tom. “We’re also continually looking for committed volunteers who can stick around and really become a part of the company.”

For the present—and from the beginning—he has been relying on student interns from Villanova University and the numerous volunteers that often turn out to sock drives.

“There’s a high turnover with volunteers,” said Tom. “They rotate in and out, but there’s a core of 30 to 40 people who always make time to make it.”

It seems like that for almost every burgeoning charitable organization—never enough money to cover costs, never enough people to fill every roll.

“Social media isn’t free,” noted Tom. “It takes a lot of time and effort, but it’s the best method [of reaching people and raising donations] that I’ve found so far.” That’s why Tom sees the value of a platform like **Seedlr**. If Seedlr can attract enough users, Tom thinks it can be a useful tool to raise awareness about smaller nonprofit organizations and to increase donations to those underrepresented causes.



Two volunteers hold Joy the Sock Puppet®, the mascot of Joy of Sox

“It’s all about collaboration,” said Tom, expressing his stance on working with other organizations to increase the number of volunteers and money donated to the Joy of Sox.

Tom is always on the lookout for new methods or platforms that can be used to help further his organization’s message or raise donations. He’s a firm believer that online giving is now the core of raising funds for nonprofits, and that this will be the case even more in the future. He estimates his donation platform breakdown as follows: 88% of donations are made online, with 10% of donations made through traditional mail, and 2% given miscellaneously.

By staying up-to-date with the habits of donors, Tom has helped the Joy of Sox expand from those smaller, local sock drives in the beginning.

“We get 70–80 requests nationwide for information and advice on how to hold local sock drives,” noted Tom. In Philadelphia, at the Joy of Sox headquarters, there’s a system in place for sock contributions. If the donor is located locally, volunteers will pick up the socks, take a picture with the donor, and post the photo with an appreciative note on the Joy of Sox Facebook page.

If the donor is out of the area, the organization will save money on postage to the Joy of Sox headquarters by directing those wishing to donate to a list of shelters. These shelters are grouped by area of the country on the Joy of Sox website to assist prospective donors with finding sock drives in his or her area. Volunteers are available to walk individuals and organizations through the process at every step.



Volunteers and clean sock recipients at a sock drive

While Joy of Sox seems to have its process down, it wasn't easy to make it all possible. Tom's devoted years of effort to facilitating the donation of over 200,000 pairs of socks. He knows firsthand how difficult founding and maintaining a nonprofit organization can be. For those who have the drive and the passion for a cause, however, he offers some advice.

"It's tough to get it started," said Tom. "You need to be persistent, you need to be *sure* you want to work for this cause, 100%." That means having several thousand dollars for legal work and initial materials, the patience to set up an executive board, thorough research into organization structure and bylaws, and at least 12–18 months of time to really get your organization started.

"It's never as easy as you first think," said Tom. "You're going to need 4 times as much effort and money as you think you need."

It doesn't get much easier once you're established, either. The Joy of Sox continues to rely on hard-working volunteers and generous donations. When Tom is asked about what makes all the frustration and effort worthwhile, he's quick to answer.

"I think back to when that lady hugged me at the shelter, years ago," said Tom. "I think of that 'epiphany moment' and the look on her face, and that makes it all worth it." Joy, indeed.

The Joy of Sox is always looking for volunteers and donations.  
There are numerous ways to get involved:

- **Visit the Joy of Sox website**

- **Get involved with nonprofit giving**

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Seedlr's blog is a way to keep you up-to-date on new features, answer FAQs, and provide a voice for up-and-coming nonprofits with organization spotlights and interviews with leaders in the nonprofit field. Ideas for future blog posts are welcome—Seedlr was created for YOU.

(And as the first community of its kind, Seedlr depends on word-of-mouth. Please share this blog with anyone interested in nonprofits or charitable causes!)

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[All statistics provided by Tom Costello, Jr. All photos from the Joy of Sox®.]



