

“Operation Shoe Tree” was a project started by my fifth grade class and teacher, Pam Barsness, at Harrison Elementary. It was something she had never done before, so we were skeptical about the outcome, but excited nonetheless. The idea was that each student would write to a person they admired, celebrity or otherwise. The first step was to write a letter explaining the project; the second was to ask the person to fill out the attached questionnaire. The survey asked questions that would lead to showing a day in the life of that person’s shoes. Lastly, we asked for a donation of the shoes that person wrote about to hang in our classroom on our “shoe tree”, which ended up being a rather large stick that always seemed to poke us when we were in our desks.

I thought for a while about whom I’d send my letter to. Originally, I had my mind dead set that I would send it somewhere local to a band called Mulberry Lane, that maybe half of the girls in my class had heard of (one knew them strictly because they were neighbors). At the time, I was a huge fan of their music and thought since they lived less than two miles from me they had to respond! I shared my thoughts with a few friends and my mother. My mother made me think twice and got me to venture outside of the box.

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets had come out earlier that year (1999). I became hooked on the series after the release of the first book and couldn’t keep my eyes out of the second one until I finished. Noticing the desire I had to read, which was something completely out of my usual tendencies, I finally decided on who I’d write to: J.K. Rowling.

The project was a large undertaking; it took us weeks to prepare. As a fifth grader, that seemed like a lifetime! After we all decided whom we’d send our letter and survey to, the next step was to create those two things. Honestly, I can’t recall what I said in the letter. I can only hope it was grammatically correct. If I remember well enough, I do believe they were sent out toward the end of October. Then the waiting began.

Shoes started piling in left and right within a couple weeks. Friends in my class received shoes from Pat Persaud (local news anchor at the time), the crocodile hunter (sent a picture, but no shoes), and even Warren Buffett (who wanted his shoes returned). It seemed like everyone received responses, with the exception of me. We were going to be leaving our tree up until winter break, which was coming up quickly. I wondered if I’d ever get to hang my new shoes on the tree!

Finally, the day came. I heard my name over the intercom one morning in class. I knew I wasn’t in trouble, but it had been so long since I had sent the letters, I had almost forgotten to be expecting something. Shoes had seemed to stop coming in and no one knew me to be a troublemaker, so to hear my name caused a commotion. I walked into the office where there was a package addressed from England with about eight stamps in the corner. I knew exactly what it was. I vividly remember skipping up the steps back to my classroom with a smile from ear to ear, something I don’t think I’ll ever forget. Of course, my classmates and I didn’t do any more learning that morning. I opened the heavily wrapped package to find black, suede, tie-up boots, unlike any shoes I had ever seen before. I read the questionnaire aloud, but, before doing so, noticed a second letter. It was a very simple note sent by “owl post” stating how wonderful the idea was and that she hoped the shoes arrived safely. Her handwriting was a little difficult for me to decipher and the humor, well, it took me years to understand how witty it actually was.

Our teacher requested each of us take a picture with our new shoes on. I crammed my feet into the boots, realizing that they had definitely been used. The insides were worn and one shoelace was far longer than the other. That was the one and only time I tried them on, knowing that they were very fragile.

I couldn’t believe it. I had the author of Harry Potter’s boots! I had J.K. Rowling’s boots! The story is still unbelievable to many, even as I’m finishing college. It’s been a great one to tell, but I feel they could do someone else more good than collecting dust, hidden in my closet. I am indebted to J.K. Rowling for provided me with an experience that has enriched my life and to Mrs. Barsness, the best fifth grade teacher a little girl could ever ask for.

The boots were finally hung with pride the week before winter break, next to Pat Persaud’s purple pumps.