

TORONTO

FOOTWEAR

The chance to own
Michael Cera's shoes.
Page 4

HANDWEAR

Fifty years of gloves
on Eglinton West.
Page 17

Deliver us from mediocrity

The problem: It's ugly outside, you're hungry and the fridge is bare.
The solution: Our first annual guide to dinner at your door *Page 7*





MARK MEDLEY / NATIONAL POST

Even the lovable Michael Cera has donated a pair of shoes, so what are you waiting for?

Helping hands offer shoes

Ron White's charity drive is step in right direction

BY MARK MEDLEY

Michael Cera's well-worn blue Vans skate shoes rest on a table near black Converse high-tops once sported by songstress Chantal Kreviazuk. Backstreet Boy Nick Carter's black-and-lime soccer cleat mingles with a white Marc Jacobs heel formerly worn by starlet Hilary Duff. A Tom Cochrane cowboy boot, his autograph scrawled in silver along the sole, vies for attention near actor Kyle MacLachlan's Geox slip-on. Meanwhile, figure skater Brian Orser, anchor Leslie Roberts, model Monika Schnarre and father-daughter acting duo Gordon and Leah Pinsent all show off their shoes for the cameras.

No, this is not a new celebrity exhibit at the Bata Shoe Museum. It's the launch of Ron White's annual shoe drive for the homeless, an event that began 12 years ago when the Toronto shoe impresario

encountered a man in dire need of some footwear.

"As a shoe guy, whenever you see someone, you look at their feet," he explains. "I was walking up Yonge Street and there's a homeless guy sitting at the edge of the street, leaning against a building. And what do I do? I look at his feet, and his toes are actually hanging out of his shoes. And it [had] literally just started to snow."

Moved by the encounter, White asked customers to donate shoes that otherwise might have been thrown away.

"When you're in the shoe business," he muses, "what you always see is people come in, and they get new shoes, and they leave their old shoes."

It's been a success: White has collected and distributed more than 14,000 pairs of shoes over the past 11 years.

"We want people to look in their closet, to see what shoes or boots they have that have some life left, dust 'em off, and bring 'em in," he

says. The shoes are cleaned, sorted, packaged and sent to charitable partners for distribution. It's such a simple solution, he wonders "why doesn't every shoe store in North America do this?"

Over the years, he's received dozens of celebrity donations, on display at the chain's Manulife Centre location, which he hopes will motivate others to give. This year, White wants to collect 2,000 pairs, a number he fell just short of last year.

"Think of it as a New Year's [resolution]," he says. "It will make a significant difference in a lot of people's lives."

Actor Gordon Pinsent agrees. "It's just going to help enormously," he says. "Who knows? The homeless will end up dressed better than we are."

■ The 12th Annual Shoe Drive for the Homeless continues at all six Ron White stores across the GTA until Feb. 10. For more details, visit ronwhite.ca.

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