

# Soul Shoes

BELLA | HA SANDALS ARE FASHIONABLY FUNDING LIFESAVING TOOLS FOR THIRD WORLD FAMILIES.

**a**fter adopting two children in the summer of 2002 from the Khánh Hòa Province in Vietnam, Mick and Keely Solimene learned their daughter Isabella had an identical twin from whom she had been separated. Determined to find their daughter's other half, the family searched the countryside villages of Vietnam's Central Highlands, eventually finding Ha, Isabella's twin, in 2011 when she was 9 years old.

Taking a closer look at the country where their adopted children were born and where Ha and her caretakers currently lived was an eye-opening experience for the Solimenes. "They farmed and had virtually nothing," Keely says. Yet the joy and love in that small village inspired the Solimenes in ways they never could have imagined.

Watching Bella and Ha, who looked so much alike but had dissimilar opportunities on opposite sides of the globe, spurred Keely to action. She wanted to help children like Ha; in fact, she felt like it was an obligation.

Specifically, Keely thought back to the difficult living conditions she saw during her travels in Vietnam in search of Ha. She remembered the mothers and babies struggling in makeshift health clinics. "We would see these newborns, and the mothers would be giving birth without running water or electricity," she says. The experience inspired the Solimenes to establish a different type of charitable business, one that would have a global impact but touch people in a personal way.

In 2012, the family launched the Bella | Ha shoe company. "Everyone needs shoes to go out into the world," Keely explains as the inspiration for the company, which produces fine leather sandals. But this would not be a typical business. The Solimenes wanted

the funds raised by the sale of their shoes to affect mothers and children of the third world in a transformative way. The question was — how could they best do that?

The answer came to Keely after reading an article written about solar suitcases. Solar suitcases, invented by Dr. Laura Stachel and her husband Hal Aronson, are simple in concept but their impact is staggering. Powered by solar panels attached to clinics' roofs, these suitcases, when opened, contain a high-powered light that can shine for up to 20 hours. Having a reliable source of light allows medical professionals the ability to perform complicated procedures, even during the night. The suitcases also contain headlamps, a fetal Doppler to monitor a baby's heart rate and a cellphone-charging unit.

"Imagine trying to deliver a baby at night in darkness, or even worse, trying to treat a complication of pregnancy?" Dr. Stachel says. "Having reliable lighting and essential electricity enables prompt, appropriate emergency obstetric care; this improves birth outcomes and ultimately saves lives. Patients are more likely to utilize a health center when they know that lighting is assured, and they don't have to bring candles or kerosene for their delivery care. And health workers have improved morale and tell us they no longer fear night duty."

"I read the article and it just resonated," Keely says. "We

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DR. LAURA STACHEL,  
INVENTOR OF THE SOLAR SUITCASE



LOREM IPSUM DOLOR

FPO: ILLUSTRATION TK



loved the genius of solar suitcases.” After reaching out to Stachel’s organization, We Care Solar, it was solidified that the proceeds from the sale of Bella | Ha sandals would be used to purchase these lifesaving suitcases.

On September 5, 2015, Keely met with midwives of the Cam Binh Clinic in the Cam Binh Commune on Binh Ba Island. Four years after finding Ha, and three years after founding Bella | Ha, the company made its first solar suitcase delivery — and the location was deliberate. The drop was at a birth clinic near Nha Trang in southern Vietnam, located close to the village where the Solimenes first met their daughter’s twin.

Later that evening, Keely shared the momentous day with her Facebook community, writing, “We delivered our first solar suitcase and a little Vietnamese baby is being safely born on an island in the East Sea tonight!”

Looking to the future, the Solimenes hope their next Bella | Ha shoe collection can fund solar suitcase drops to Ethiopia — and then beyond. “Our vision moving forward is really to have lines [helping places] all over the world,” Keely says. “Our story begins with a suitcase and ends with a suitcase.” ☺



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