BUSINESS & ECONOMY

The Bright Side: Recent high school graduate sells 25,000 masks to raise money for nonprofits

By Ellie French   Nov 1 2020

Doug Altshuler of Masks4Missions, his project to design and distribute masks to raise money for nonprofits, in Burlington on Friday, Oct. 30, 2020. Photo by Glenn Russell/VTDigger

If you see a mask with the logo of a Vermont nonprofit, there's a good chance it was designed by Doug Altshuler.

The 18-year-old came up with an idea this summer he calls "Masks4Missions" — a project to design and distribute masks to raise money for nonprofit organizations across Vermont. And just a few weeks in, he already has thousands of masks with his designs in the hands of Vermonters.

Altshuler, who graduated from high school in June, has come up in the summers from his home in Groton, Massachusetts, to work as a camp counselor at Shelburne Farms.

This summer, camp was closed, but Altshuler didn't want to give up on helping Shelburne Farms.

His original idea was to sell masks at a table outside Shelburne Farms to help raise a little extra money for the nonprofit during the pandemic. But as the idea percolated, Altshuler realized that many more organizations might be interested in custom masks.

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"This idea is so heavily supported," he said. "Whenever I bring it up to a new organization, people say, 'I'm on board, let me hop on.'"

Right away, Altshuler's contacts at Shelburne Farms connected him with the Vermont Community Foundation, which in turn connected him with nonprofits all across the state, and the project was off and running.

"I thought back to April, when with everyone wearing masks, and people on the streets felt like strangers," he said. "It felt like everyone was an opponent of yours in the Covid fight."

He wanted to use that same thing — the mask that made everyone feel so disconnected — to bring people together.

Altshuler said Masks4Missions is now working with more than 50 nonprofits. It designs masks with nonprofits' logos and then sell them both directly to the nonprofits, and to the public, with all the profits going back to the organizations.

From the beginning, he believed it was important that the initiative be a youth-led.

"As the demographic that was not affected by Covid very badly as a health risk, it's important that our message is the message of selflessness and support for our community," he said.

Plus, young people use social media more often and can spread positive messages about mask wearing.

He leveraged that network for Vermont Mask Day earlier this month to launch the Masks4Missions project.

"It all started off with the idea of how do we get our message out there," Altshuler said.

The logo for Masks4Missions, which designs and distributes masks to raise money for nonprofit organizations across Vermont. Courtesy photo

He said the team wanted a big kickoff event for Masks4Missions, one that celebrated Vermont's success with mask-wearing, while also looking ahead to the hard times expected this winter.

After meeting with the governor and state legislators, and getting Oct. 6 officially designated as Vermont Mask Day, Altshuler and his team organized a series of events, including a social media contest, a Grace Potter concert, and mask distributions at community centers and food shelves statewide.

In that first week alone, Altshuler said, more than 25,000 masks were distributed through nonprofits across Vermont.

Now, production has begun on more than 30,000 additional masks that should be out by the end of the year.

"It's the norm that masks are just kind of there, especially in Vermont," Altshuler said. "But going into winter, when people are moving inside, making sure we stay vigilant and don't get sloppy as we move forward is very important."

Altshuler hopes this project won't extend much beyond the end of the year, but he's dedicated to sticking with the project until the pandemic has ended.

"The best situation would be if there was no need for me to do this work anymore because we don't need to wear masks anymore," he said. "As much as I love to design and distribute masks, I think we'd all rather not have to wear them."

Doug Altshuler, age 18, founded Masks4Missions to design and distribute masks to raise money for nonprofit organizations across Vermont. Courtesy photo