



## Saltwater Portrait »

# Long Neck woman is Clothing Our Kids

## Mary Rio finds ways to help Sussex County children in need

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Mary Rio doesn't stand out in a crowd, and she likes it that way. As she is walking along the beach searching for shells, her bespectacled face gives her an air of quiet serenity.

At home in Long Neck, she enjoys walking her Yorkie, Angel, or snuggling with Salem, her cat. Her love of the beach is echoed in her home with shells adorning surfaces and artwork.

Rio's gentle exterior is only transformed when she begins to talk about children. Then her face lights up and her calming voice becomes spirited.

The retired office manager founded Clothing Our Kids last year, and in February she received nonprofit status, which will allow her to apply for and receive grants to keep her new charity running.

It all started four years ago when her husband, John, retired from a teaching job in Pennsylvania and accepted an assistant principal job at an elementary school in Dorchester County, Md. Rio, 63, retired, and the couple found their dream home in Long Neck.

"He came home from school one night and asked me if I could collect some clothes that our grandkids had outgrown," Rio said.

A young boy at her husband's school had gotten sick on himself on Monday and by the middle of the week, the little boy was still wearing the same outfit, and it was beginning to smell.

"The kids were starting to bully him, and the teachers asked for help," Rio said.

Rio went out and bought the

boy three outfits and also asked her children, Doris and Robert, to send clothes from Pennsylvania.

"I asked my husband if it was just this one child that had needs, but he told me there were lots of kids who didn't have many clothes," Rio said. "It just tugged at my heartstrings."

Rio decided she was going to start a nonprofit and began collecting and buying clothes.

"I decided to focus on Sussex County elementary schools," she said. "I wasn't sure that I could even do all of them."

Shortly after starting her new venture, Rio attended Lunch with a Purpose, a group of women all involved in Cape Region charities.

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- MARY RIO

There she met Cheryl Mitchell of Lunch with a Purpose and Jan Turner of Shoes that Fit who gave her insight on how to successfully run a nonprofit.

These two women set Rio on her course, connecting her with a network of area grandparents who helped collect and purchase clothes when Rio didn't have the right size for a child in need. Her army of volunteers has helped her collect mountains of clothes, shoes, underwear and sweatpants, which are organized and stacked in Rio's guest bedroom.

"My heart would just sink when a little girl would need



RACHEL SWICK MAVITY PHOTOS

**MARY RIO HAS TRANSFORMED** her guest bedroom into a clothing storeroom where she sorts all the items she donates to Sussex County schools through her nonprofit Clothing Our Kids.

shoes, because I had a really hard time getting shoes, so a lot of times I would just go out and buy them," Rio said. "I just couldn't turn anyone down."

She was spending her own money because she was still waiting for nonprofit status. It took 10 months for the certificate to arrive.

Her world opened up when earlier this month, Sussex County taxpayers, through a grant from Councilwoman Joan Deaver, donated \$2,000 to Rio's Clothing Our Kids. She also received a \$500 grant from Walmart in Rehoboth Beach.

"The hard part for me is asking for money, because I just like getting the clothes and dropping them off," Rio said.

Now that money is coming in, Rio is able to buy in bulk. When she sees sweatpants for \$2 or shoes for \$7 at Walmart she buys them all. She also shops the area consignment stores and thrift shops where she can find great gently used items.

"It really did surprise me to find out there was such a need in this area," Rio said. "We think about the beach area and the retirees, but we forget that with job losses and foreclosures, the kids are really suffering."

In some cases, parents go to shelters and leave children with friends or family. This means a new school district and reduced-price lunches at schools, but it



Mary Rio of Long Neck shows off some of her favorite shells she collected from area beaches.

doesn't always mean the kids have clothing that is appropriate for school.

"You really have to face facts. There are people losing their houses out there. The adults can fend for themselves, but the kids really can't," Rio said.

Rio is now collecting spring clothes for sizes 5T through XXL youth. She also accepts new underwear, and new or gently used shoes in youth sizes.

Clothing Our Kids donated 1,488 items to eight schools last year, and Rio is hoping to double donations in the coming year.

She doesn't take a salary, and all donations or grants go directly to Sussex County children in need.

When she isn't collecting clothing, Rio enjoys adding to her sea shell collection.

"My favorite place is Conquest Road beach, where I walk and find the best shells," Rio said. "We are beach bums. I love to walk the beach. That's where you can find me every weekend."

For more information on Clothing Our Kids, call Rio at 302-945-2150 or go to [www.clothingourkids.com](http://www.clothingourkids.com).

# Botanical gardens group to host native plant presentation May 11

Horticulturist Dr. Robert Lyons will present "The Color of the Native Plant Palette and Other Related Thoughts" from noon to 1:45 p.m., Saturday, May 11, at the Lewes Public Library. This presentation is sponsored by Southern Delaware Botanical Gardens.

Lyons is a professor of landscape horticulture, program director for the Longwood Graduate Program in Public Horticulture, director of the Center for Public Horticulture at the University of Delaware and a renowned photographer.

A wide variety of suitable na-

tive species and derived cultivars will be discussed in this presentation, highlighting plants with qualities that are frequently considered colorful and visually appealing by landscapers and gardeners alike.

Attention will also be given to aggressive natives and the

sensible inclusion of non-native, non-invasive plants that contribute to successful landscape performance, visual interest and function with a low-maintenance philosophy. Plant lists will be available. The program is free to SDBG members and \$17 for nonmembers.

The mission of the Southern Delaware Botanical Gardens is to create a world-class, inspirational, educational and sustainable botanic garden in southern Delaware for the benefit and enjoyment of the public.

For more information, go to [delawaregardens.org](http://delawaregardens.org).