

Mary Rio is the founder of Clothing Our Kids, a nonprofit Organization that provides clothing to Sussex County elementary school age children in need. Rio stores the clothing in her home.



A Perfect Fit

Mary Rio addresses a community need — and realizes a passion for helping others — with Clothing Our Kids

By Jessica Gordon | Photograph by Scott Nathan

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Good Neighbor Lending a helping hand

John Rio, an assistant principal at a Maryland elementary school, came home from work one day in late 2011 with something unusual on his mind. A young student had been wearing the same clothes, day after day, despite their worn and soiled condition; Rio asked his wife if she would gather some of the clothes their grandchildren had outgrown so he could provide the student with something better to wear.

It was this simple request that catapulted Mary Rio's life into something completely different and unexpected.

Now, nearly two years after supplying clothing to that student, she works tirelessly for the nonprofit organization she formed, Clothing Our Kids, trying hard to balance retirement and the care of children in need.

The youngest of three children in a middle-class family, Rio says she herself was never in need of anything. All of the basics were there: a roof over her head, food to eat, and plenty of hand-me-down clothes from her siblings. But she can still picture the girl in her third-grade class, often sent to school in clothing inappropriate for the weather or just worn and tattered, who was picked on as a result. Rio, shaking her head, recalls how bad it made her feel, saying, "A child should not be defined by what they wear."

She had asked her husband questions about that first student back in 2011, and the more he told her, the more she realized how many local children are living in poverty. "I started hearing these stories about single parents struggling just to feed their kids and parents losing their jobs, and then their homes," she says. "New clothes just aren't feasible for these families." With that new awareness, the self-proclaimed introvert decided she had to act. In addition to gathering little-worn clothing

from her grandchildren, Rio canvassed her Long Neck neighborhood, securing hand-me-downs in pristine condition that she could donate to families. "My rule is that I only give clothes that are basically brand new," she explains. "If you wouldn't wear it in public, then I don't want it."

Rio then expanded her quest, asking clothing stores for donations. Without nonprofit status, however, she quickly learned that that was a dead-end: "I would walk into the outlets, explain what I was doing and ask for donations," but when she told them she didn't have a tax ID number, "they would look at me like I was crazy."

Having spent nearly 40 years as an "office person," responsible for things like general ledgers and accounting, securing donations was a whole new ballgame for her. In April 2012, Rio took the first steps required to form a nonprofit and sent in her application for tax-exempt status to the Internal Revenue Service. It took 10 long months to hear back, despite calling every month to check on the progress of her paperwork. ("They knew me by name," she says with a laugh.) In February of this year, Rio finally got what she had been waiting for, and Clothing Our Kids became an official nonprofit. Though the application process took longer than she anticipated, it did not slow her down. Throughout those 10 months, Rio continued to collect clothing, forming what she calls a "little store" on the second floor of her home: "I have four double racks of clothes, sorted by size. The jeans are in individual bins, the shoes are in the closet."

Rio was also busy contacting every elementary school in Sussex County, emailing school nurses and counselors to let them know her services were available. By the end of June 2012, she had given out more than 1,400 clothing items to nine different elementary schools and had secured a total of \$186 in funding — meaning that "basically, I funded the entire first year myself," she says good-naturedly. Today, Clothing Our Kids services 19 elementary schools and has more than 30 volunteers who help her secure, launder and distribute clothing. "They are all over the county," Rio says of her volunteer force, "and all of them came to me through word of mouth."

Many of those volunteers are also retirees, primarily teachers, administrators and nurses.

"Our mission seems to touch their hearts," Rio notes. "They've been there, they know what the needs are, and they enjoy knowing that they are helping." Some of the original volunteers are now board members, and what the organizer calls her "right-hand people."

One of them, Suzanne Worrall, found herself in an unfamiliar position when it came to charitable giving. "Before I retired, I could afford to donate to charities, but had no time to be personally involved," says the Millsboro resident. "Now I'm retired and the circumstances are reversed." Worrall, who retired from a career in finance, notes that Clothing Our Kids not only addresses an important need in the community, but is unique in its composition. Calling the organization "non-bureaucratic and immediately responsive to the needs of our schoolchildren," she points out that "we don't try to solve all problems — just the problems of one child at a time."

Clothing Our Kids is also a resource for school nurses. "If a child has an 'accident' at school, they will go to the nurse," Rio explains. "But there is no budget in the schools for extra clothing. Often I will supply school nurses with sets of clothes — for both boys and girls — to keep in their office. They are always put to use."

Celeste Babiarez, the school nurse at H.O. Brittingham Elementary School in Milton, appreciates the help. "Mary is very prompt in responding," she says. "If I email her or call her, she is back to me within the day and often gets me things by the end of the school day. It's amazing." Babiarez has called on Clothing Our Kids numerous times, and says Rio has been a "godsend" to her students, supplying everything from winter coats to new pairs of shoes: "We had a child whose parents cut the tops of their shoes so their toes could come out. Another child was walking funny in their size 2 shoes; Mary brought in a bunch of different, bigger sizes, and it turned out the child needed a size 6."

The organization also offers emergency clothing for children who are in the midst of a family crisis, whether it's loss of property from a house fire or they are being removed from their home by the Division of Family Services. "Getting them back to school the next day is a priority," says Rio, who provides personal items to help the kids through such difficult times. "In an emergency situation, I always make sure they have a fuzzy blanket, a stuffed animal, and maybe a coloring book to keep them busy."

Working exclusively through school representatives, Rio never meets the children she helps. Occasionally she will receive a thank-you note, and every one of them is cherished. One simply reads, "Thank you for giving me the winter jacket, I really like it, it's warm!" It's the personal satisfaction derived from the nonprofit's efforts that makes all of the hard work worthwhile. "This organization has given me life," says Rio, who believes she would be sitting at home watching television with her dog if it weren't for Clothing Our Kids. "It's given me the opportunity to meet new people, and it's just rejuvenated me." Despite this satisfaction, however, she is determined to keep the organization small. "It will always be run out of my house," she says, pointing to low operational costs as a key to success. Rio pays no one, buys all of the clothing detergent with her own money, and never uses the organization's funds for gas unless someone specifically hands her cash for that purpose. She has also applied for grants, which has paid off. Clothing Our Kids has received funding from Wal-Mart, the Sussex County Council and the Carl M. Freeman Foundation. Although she would like to be able to supply clothes to kids of all ages, the workload that would be required isn't feasible. "I want a balance between my retirement and supporting the schools," Rio explains. With the initial start-up and logistics of the organization now behind her, that balance can be seen in the distance. "Now I have the money and the network and I have wonderful school districts to work with," she says. "It all seems to run very smoothly." And she's pretty sure the kids she clothes would agree. □

Jessica Gordon, a freelancer who lives in Lewes, has written for *The News Journal* and *Delaware Today* magazine.

On the Web To learn more about Clothing Our Kids go to clothingourkids.com.

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