

Golfers, sponsors sought for Sussex County charity fundraiser

By Rebecca Jones

Ten years ago, John Rio – an assistant principal at an elementary school in Sussex County – came home from his job. His wife, Mary, listened intently as he told the sad story of a young girl who went to school every day in the same soiled clothing. The little girl's self-esteem was dangerously low, as she was mocked by her peers. In the course of that conversation, Mary Rio knew what she needed to do: she bought a set of clothing for the young girl. To her delight, the child was thrilled.

However, to Mary's dismay, she learned that that little girl was not the only child in her husband's school who was lacking a basic need – a set of clean clothing to attend school. So, Mary took it upon herself to gather various sizes of clothing, and store it all in a guest bedroom of her home. When a teacher, nurse or guidance counselor contacted her regarding a need, Rio would fulfill it. Soon, she ran out of room in her home, and expanded the operation to her garage. Rio also received valued assistance from her neighbor. Other friends heard about Mary Rio's project, and signed up to help.

Ten years later, even though the headquarters for "Clothing Our Kids" is in Millsboro, this charity serves school children throughout the entirety of Sussex County with the help of over 150 unpaid volunteers. Within that span of 10 years, Clothing Our Kids has moved from Rio's garage to a store-front location. About five years ago, Rio saw the joy on a child's face when they receive a set of brand-new clothing, as opposed to pre-worn outfits; so, the only outfits now given to children out of the charity organization are never-worn.

And that's part of the appeal of Clothing Our Kids for a new volunteer, Delmar resident Lisa Aydelotte-Conley. She read

about the program online, and decided to check it out. "Oh, yes, it's pretty impressive. I went in there and – wow!" she said. "I was so impressed how everything was handled. It's very organized, very well-run."

Aydelotte-Conley was an active flight attendant before she became injured during a flight. However, Clothing Our Kids has various roles to fill that allows her to do what she can to help.

"If I volunteer, I like to volunteer either for children, the elderly, or the military. Children are our future," she said. She also said she noticed one thing when children receive new clothing: "They wanted to go to school again. That means a lot. They're proud to go to school. They can hold their heads up, and that boosts their self-confidence. They learn better. It's like a domino effect – it can't go wrong."

Acting president of Clothing Our Kids, Bob Blouin, explained the process from discovering a need to fulfilling it, "Teachers are on the frontline, seeing the needs, day in-day out, of their students. Many times, teachers will try to fulfill the need themselves spending their own money to help their kids. That's what we're here for... to clothe one kid at a time."

He explained that once a teacher, school nurse, or counselor sees a need of a student, that professional can then contact Clothing Our Kids. The professional then is given an account with the organization. From there, the teacher or other professional is instructed to fill out a form. That form is then printed out, and the order is filled by a volunteer. In each box a child will receive (dependent on the time of the year): five shirts, three pants, one hoody, 5-7 pairs of underwear, 5-7 pairs of socks, one pair of shoes, and one set of pajamas. They also supply brand new winter coats on an as-needed basis.

The clothing is then put in a box, and taken to the school. The person from the school who ordered the clothing for the child receives the box. It is then given to the child privately, after school, away from other children. Not only does Clothing Our Kids supply regular clothes for school, but they also supply uniforms for those who do not have them.

Blouin related a story that happened to him. "I was a mentor at an elementary school before COVID. The boy I mentored was very down one day. I asked him what was wrong, and he said he didn't have a winter coat. Because it was cold, he was forced to stay inside with a teacher. It was as if he was being punished, just because he had no coat," he said. He shook his head at the memory, then continued. "I asked his teacher if she knew about Clothing Our Kids, and told her how to get a coat for the boy." His face broke out into a smile as he said, "Well the next week, that kid had a brand-new coat. It was a thrill to see that kid's smile."

Blouin stated it costs approximately \$150,000 a year to fund the clothing, and that cost will no doubt rise because the organization is expanding to cover middle school children. At this present time, Clothing Our Kids provides clothing for

children at 10 head-starts, 32 elementary schools, and will be catering to three middle schools when the new year begins. "We are always looking for ways to help children and teachers throughout the entirety of Sussex County," he said.

The way Clothing Our Kids is funded is tri-fold. The bulk of their funding is raised through their yearly golf tourney. The eighth annual Clothing Our Kids Charity Golf Tournament will be held Oct. 10 at the Peninsula Golf and Country Club. Not only do they need golfers to sign up, they are also looking for sponsors to help make it all possible.

"One of our contributors was in foster care when he was a child," said Blouin. "He's now a successful business owner here in Sussex County. That businessman remembers what it was like when he didn't have clothes. And now, he wants to give back to the community. It's the thing that hits you squarely in the eyes."

Blouin then stated Clothing Our Kids relies upon the generosity of grants, and gifts from churches, family foundations, and places like the Freeman Foundation. Blouin said they also appreciate clothing drives. He mentioned how the employees at Mountaire asked to make Clothing Our Kids a service project for their company last year, and a church that holds a "Sundies Undies" day at their fellowship.

"If you do want to hold a clothing drive, I would advise whoever wishes to do that, contact us to find out where the need is greatest. For example, I see where



Shown is the entrance to the Clothing Our Kids headquarters in Millsboro.

we will need hoodies soon," Blouin said. They also rely upon "bulk buying" opportunities to better use the money they receive.

For those interested in volunteering, donating, participating in or sponsoring the golf tournament, or if you're a school or social services professional who knows of a child in need of a new set of clothes, Blouin said to go to the website: clothingourkids.org. Clothing Our Kids serves all of Sussex County.

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Shown is some of the clothing available at the Clothing Our Kids headquarters in Millsboro. The organization serves students throughout Sussex County. Photo by Rebecca Jones