

Clothing Our Kids meeting greater need in Sussex

By Glenn Rolfe

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MILLSBORO — Oh how Clothing Our Kids has grown.

It was started 12 years ago by Mary Rio, after her husband shared the heartbreak of a little girl who wore the same clothes to school five days in a row.

“I often remind people, if you ever wonder if one person can make a difference — Mary Rio,” said Clothing Our Kids president Bob Blouin.

From its rented volunteer center in Millsboro, the organization today is armed with nearly 100 volunteers. Many are retirees and some are seasonal Sussex County residents. They assist in inventory, itemizing and packing orders. Each clothing box typically contains five sets, or a week’s worth of new school garments.

Students also receive winter coats, and the program is expanding to include sneakers.

Volunteers also deliver the clothing boxes to school nurses, counselors, teachers and administrators, who in turn give them to the students.

Clothing Our Kids was initially launched by Ms. Rio to serve elementary students identified as being in need. It has expanded and now serves Head Start/pre-K, elementary and middle schools throughout Sussex County.

“We want the teachers in Sussex County to not take a dime out of their pocket to help with clothing for these kids. That is what we do. We’re your resource,” Mr. Blouin said.

The process is discreet in efforts to not cause any embarrassment.

“We cover all of Sussex County. Every one of the schools has a username or a password that they can order clothes. They order the kids’ clothes,” Mr. Blouin said. “We don’t see the kids per se, we see orders. We don’t track names. Only the first name with sizes.”

Thus far in 2023-24, the program has served 2,218 kids, with more than 14,500 items distributed. Since its 2012 inception, 206,000 items have been distributed, reaching just shy of 35,000 kids.

“When we were just doing elementary, we spent about \$100,000 a year. This year we are on track to spend about \$150,000 to \$160,000. And that’s not going to go away,” Mr. Blouin said.

Distribution of the clothing by school staff to the child has several benefits.

“One obviously is the benefit to the child. The child gets to feel good about themselves ... all new clothes. That gives the child great self-esteem when they get a set of clothing, and they get to rip the tags off. Then they know nobody else has worn that piece of clothing,” said Mr. Blouin.

Another benefit is the recipient’s relationship with the teacher, nurse or staff member.

Mr. Blouin shared a story told by one teacher who when giving a box of clothing to an elementary girl, the pupil asked if she could “take one thing out of this.”

The teacher informed the girl the entire box of clothing was hers. “The girl started to cry, and the teacher started to cry,” Mr. Blouin said.

Clothing Our Kids’ major fundraiser is its annual golf outing, usually in October. That typically generates \$50,000 to \$60,000.

The organization has also put together a small team of volunteers to deal with grant applications. In addition, the group welcomes community support, with new clothing drives through churches and various community groups.

“The new clothing drive, that has been wildly successful,” Mr. Blouin said.

Of course, monetary donations are always welcome. “Donate, and we’ll do the shopping,” Mr. Blouin said.

Clothing Our Kids usually gets orders in August but this past June and July it worked in concert with homeless shelters and social services to serve students under those umbrellas. With ARPA money from COVID drying up, Mr. Blouin said, “Some of these parents are having a hard time clothing their kids.”

For more information on Clothing Our Kids, the golf tournament or sponsorships, visit clothingourkids.org.

Staff writer Glenn Rolfe can be reached at rolfe@iniusa.org. Follow @glennrolfeBTBN on X.