

NEWS



Assistance League Chicagoland West member Heather Laughman and a parent volunteer check to see if a new coat fits one of the students at Anne M. Jeans School. Through its Operation School Bell program, the league donated more than 200 coats Oct. 10 to students at the Burr

Ridge school. Volunteer Ricki Lessig (left) and a parent find the right bag for one of the students who has arrived. The program serves more than 2,000 students from 30 schools in Hinsdale, Burr Ridge, Clarendon Hills and half a dozen other west suburban communities. (Jim Slonoff photos)

Winter coats warm the body and spirit

ALCW's Operation School Bell program helps kids stay warm and feel like they belong

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When the weather outside is frightful, a new warm winter coat is delightful.

But a new coat does more than just keep people warm, according to members of Assistance League Chicagoland West. It boosts kids' confidence and can make a difference in their education, which is why Operation School Bell is a particularly rewarding initiative for many ALCW members.

"This is not a coat drive of used coats," said Meg Cooper, vice president of communications. "This is providing children with new winter coats. Many of them are getting a new piece of clothing for the first time in their lives, and they tell you that."

She recalled the comment of a young student on one of the delivery days.

"One of the girls that received a coat at one of our schools looked at that new coat and said, 'Thank you. Now I fit in,'" Cooper said. "That makes you realize how important it feels to these

children and how valuable it is."

Meghan Radtke is a social worker at Anne M. Jeans School, one of the distribution sites. The school has about 75 percent low-income students, she said, and the new coats absolutely make a difference in how kids feel at school.

"I go down to the classroom to get the kids on my list to bring them for their fitting and the kids get so excited when they hear their name and they know they are getting their new coat," she said. "They're proud to show me that they're wearing their new coat. It's fun."

Operation School Bell began in 1949, Cooper explained, with a teacher in Bakersfield, Calif., who was angry about the poor attendance by immigrant farm workers' children.

"She assumed it was because their parents didn't really care whether their children were coming to school or not," Cooper said.

The teacher was humbled when she discovered the real reason. Some families had only one pair of pants they were proud enough to send a

kid to school wearing, so only one child could go to school on any given day.

Assistance League chapters throughout the country have their own variations on the program.

"In warmer climates, it's shoes and uniforms or clothes," Cooper said.

The coats are most welcome here, though — especially by those who have immigrated from warmer climates.

"There are huge populations coming here now who have never experienced a Chicago winter," Cooper said. "Boy do they get surprised."

'The coat lady's here!'

Bags labeled with students' names, identifying their teacher and grade, line the tables at Anne M. Jeans School Oct. 10, when more than 200 kids will receive new winter coats.

This is Heather Laughman's fourth year volunteering at the coat distribution day, and she says assistance from the school is key to keeping Operation School Bell operate smoothly.

"Thanks goodness for the social worker, who is very organized," she says.

She and Ricki Lessig, also from ALCW, are joined by parent volunteers who help kids try coats on. The kids raise their arms up high to see if the sleeves are long enough and, if the size is right, the kids are given markers to write their names in the coats. They all seem excited about their new piece of clothing.

"Kids' smiling faces — you can't beat that," Lessig says.

Lessig also has been bringing new coats to Anne M. Jeans for four years, and students now know what it means when she arrives.

"The coat lady's here! The coat lady's here!" she has heard them exclaim after spotting her.

The volunteers need to keep kids moving, but that doesn't mean they don't have time to offer a compliment.

"That's a beautiful color on you," Laughman tells one girl. "It's perfect."

The hat and gloves the girl discovers in her bag generate an even bigger smile on her face.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Making a Difference is a partnership between The Hinsdalean and Assistance League Chicagoland West, whose mission is to deliver education and outreach programs that address needs and help transform lives in local communities.

Parent volunteer Dana Boyd is enjoying herself almost as much as the kids.

"I'm new to the district, so I'm excited to be able to participate in volunteer opportunities to give back," she said.

The interaction with younger students appeals to her.

"My daughter is 13, so this is a joy," she said. "They seem really appreciative."

Now that the weather has been consistently cold, Radtke said she has seen children wearing the brightly-colored, beautiful coats more often.

"They're all bundled up with the new coats and hats and gloves," she said. "Our kids are very lucky — and our community — to benefit from this program."