

Operation School Bell offers warm clothes for cold days ahead

By KURT LIEDTKE

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Kids across the Klamath Basin will be properly clothed for winter weather, regardless of family income, thanks to the annual Operation School Bell clothing giveaway held on multiple nights at Fred Meyer in Klamath Falls.

One of the primary objectives of the Assistance League of Klamath Basin, a philanthropic chapter service organization that also operates Findables used furniture and coordinates the annual Country Christmas Jubilee, is to provide school children with proper clothing during the school year. The annual giveaway provides families with a \$115 clothing certificate allotment for elementary students and \$120 for middle and high school, allowing kids to pick out new clothes and shoes they like at Fred Meyer during designated evenings rather than hand-me-downs.

Eligible students from kindergarten through high school are referred by teachers, counselors and other concerned professionals within the school system for Operation School Bell participation at the start of the year. With a focus on low-income households, approximately 800 kids a year participate in the event from Klamath Falls schools and as far away as Tulelake, Chiloquin, Keno and Gilchrist.

PERUSING THE AISLES

Spread across four nights in September welcoming kids and their parents to Fred Meyer to peruse aisles for the clothes they like, the event is operated by roughly 30 volunteers alongside Fred Meyer staff, while the store offers special discounts to provide the most bang for each kid's buck. Additionally, Assistance League members spend the year creating handmade woolen hats, scarves and gloves to give away at the event, as well as free hygiene kits.

"They are picky sometimes at that age, and it's esteem build-



H&N PHOTO BY KURT LIEDTKE

Patrick Tayon, accompanied by his mother, tries on a free wool hat during the annual Operation School Bell children's clothing giveaway at Fred Meyer on Thursday.

ing for the kids to buy their own clothes," said Merlaire Zwartverwer, vice president of communications and public relations for Assistance League of Klamath Basin. "We hope they feel more confident having cool clothes like the other kids, and Fred Meyer offers a nice array of choices for Klamath, and the store is so generous with discounts on these nights."

For several hours on each designated night, families flooded in to Fred Meyer, greeted with free snacks, hats, gloves, scarves and a budget to pick out clothes they like. Many participating kids signed thank you cards after completing their shopping sprees, assisted throughout by Assistance League volunteers willing to offer a helping hand or kind smile.

When Operation School Bell launched, initially volunteers collected donated clothes or bought new clothes and brought them to schools to distribute. In 2013 a relationship was established with Fred Meyer of Klamath Falls, providing a friendly setting where kids can feel like they are shopping for what they want rather than receiving handouts.

YEAR-ROUND EFFORT

Funding for Operation School Bell is a year-round venture through grants and private donations. Zwartverwer noted this year has been a successful one for funding, collecting approximately \$30,000 in grants and even more than that from donors, including one very supportive anonymous donor who single-handedly had provided more than \$30,000. Additionally, all sales from Findables go directly towards funding of Operation School Bell and other philanthropic efforts by the Assistance League. The annual Jubilee, held at the Running Y Ranch Resort, incorporates a dinner banquet and auction with decorated Christmas trees that are also sold.

In addition to Operation School Bell, the Assistance League also provides funds for Exodus House – part of Integral Youth Services offering a temporary shelter for homeless and runaway youth and those awaiting foster care homes.

Added this year to Operation School Bell is a program allocating funds to cover the cost of athletic shoes for students at Stearns Elementary School who are involved in a running

and exercise program. To help facilitate this new effort, Assistance League is developing a relationship with Big 5 Sporting Goods which they hope will allow shoe certificates much in the same manner Fred Meyer provides clothing.

JOIN THE EFFORT

"Our organization is a membership, and there are no paid members," added Zwartverwer. "Our criteria is just wanting to make new friendships with other volunteers who share an interest in helping kids and doing something positive. Anyone who would like to be a member please call or visit Findables or get on our website."

The Klamath Basin chapter of Assistance League is in its 32nd year of operation, part of a national network of over 120 chapters and 28,000 volunteers across the country. Volunteers operate Findables year-round, at 1330 E. Main St.

For more information about Assistance League of Klamath Basin visit www.klamathbasin-assistanceleague.org.

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