



Group helps clothe needy Cape children

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For an increasing number of Cape Cod children, the economic recession means going to school in pants that are too short, T-shirts that don't fit — and no winter jacket.

The situation doesn't sit well with three women from Dennis and Yarmouth, who have started a new organization that collects clothing for schools and social service agencies to distribute to needy children.

The organization is called Katelynn's Closet, and it's named after the daughter of co-founder Ann Bearse and her husband Matt Bearse. Katelynn Bearse died at age 9, six years ago, while waiting for a heart transplant.

"She loved fashion," said Bearse, a West Yarmouth resident. She said when her daughter looked good, she felt good.

Since this fall, Bearse and Katelynn's Closet co-founders Beth Davis of Yarmouthport and Davis' sister, Suzie Roettig of Dennis, have put together clothing packages for approximately 150 children, mainly in the Mid-Cape area.

School nurses and social workers identify children in need and tell Katelynn's Closet the first initial of the recipient, as well as the child's gender and clothing size.

The recipients get a week's worth of clothing: four tops, three bottoms, five sets of new underwear and three new pairs of socks. They may also receive a sweatshirt, pajamas and a book.

Sometimes school officials specifically request shoes, boots or winter jackets. This past week Katelynn's Closet delivered 23 jackets to just one school.

"It's extremely helpful," said Tom Gunning, social worker at the Mattacheese Middle School in West Yarmouth, where about 10 children from six families received a week's worth of clothing last month.

"This is a middle school, so clothes are everything," he said. "Peer pressure is big. If you don't have something cool to wear, it's very bad."

The organizers collect used and new clothing via clothing drives and through an e-mail grapevine of friends and supporters.

Davis said one of her friends recently went out and bought a new North Face size 12 jacket for a girl in need of a winter coat.

"She said, 'I was that kid with nothing,'" and now that she's financially comfortable she wants to help other people, Davis said. "The need is real, and it's shocking, really."

School nurses have told stories of tracing students' feet on scraps of paper so they could buy the children shoes in the right sizes or purchasing a sweatshirt for a student walking to school.

As parents struggle to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table, clothing can get short shrift, said Marilyn Martin, school nurse at the M. E. Small School in West Yarmouth, which Katelynn Bearse attended.

"A lot of people have lost their jobs," and many more are struggling with the high cost of housing on Cape Cod, she said.

The number of low-income families facing serious food shortages has exploded over the past year, says a state anti-hunger organization called Project Bread.

The organization says its statistics for 2009 show nearly one-third of students in Hyannis schools qualify for free or reduced lunches — and it fears figures for 2010 "will dwarf current data as they capture the full impact of the economic crisis we're in."

Katelynn's Closet operates out of the cramped South Yarmouth basement of Davis' husband's business, but the organizers hope to find a space that will be big enough to allow volunteers and school children to help sort and package clothing.

The plan calls for expanding the services of Katelynn's Closet to all Cape and Islands schools as well as to teenagers, Bearse said. Currently the stock in Katelynn's Closet is limited to sizes 4 to 18.

While the names of children receiving clothing are kept confidential, Davis said the feedback she's received has been heart warming — and heart breaking.

One first grader who'd been coming to school in pants that came halfway up his shins "had come skipping down the aisles" in his new clothes, Davis said.

A 5-year-old girl in foster care put on an outfit "and started dancing around," Davis said. "She said, 'Is all this for me?'"

The difficulty of clothing children in foster care was the seed that started Katelynn's Closet, said Davis, a mother of five.

Bearse, a foster parent who has adopted two of her charges — and now has three children, as does Roettig — says the state Department of Children and Families' quarterly clothing allowance is not enough to cover the full cost of a growing child's clothes and shoes.

The state gives school-aged foster children \$181 to \$282 four times a year for clothing.

"Originally we were going to help just the foster kids and their families, but we saw the need on the Cape was so immense," Bearse said.

Having a resource like Katelynn's Closet available is "absolutely fantastic," Martin said. "The great part of this is it isn't just for Christmas. It's the whole year."

For more information on Katelynn's Closet, call Ann Bearse at 508-771-3699 or e-mail her at katelynns closet@yahoo.com.

A snapshot of need

Individuals who have lost jobs and homes or are struggling to get by on low or stagnant wages are having a tough time putting enough food on their tables, let alone clothing their children, poverty workers say.

"The most vulnerable among us - children, elders, immigrants - have been devastated by the impact of widespread unemployment, foreclosures and sky-rocketing health care costs," according to an anti-hunger organization's 2009 status report.

The Project Bread report, released in November, says more than one-half million state residents are struggling to put food on the table.

The Project Bread foodsource hotline, which links hungry people with food in their neighborhood, experienced a 31 percent increase in calls in 2009. And food pantries and soup kitchens funded by Project Bread served 32 percent more meals than the year before.

Project Bread statistics show that 8.3 percent of all Massachusetts households had problems getting enough food last year.

The problem was worse in low-income communities such as Hyannis, where 32.1 percent of schoolchildren are on free or reduced lunch.

Source: Project Bread

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