

Project WOW is the way to Ward Off Winter

SUBURBAN ACCENTS



SALLY GERAK

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Residents of this area support various holiday giving programs quite generously. They give food, toys and money to countless charities. The need is great and the Christmas spirit evokes a sense of caring that warms the heart.

But in spite of this seasonal generosity, many youngsters are still arriving at nearby schools inadequately clothed to ward off the biting winter cold. This situation has prompted Bloomfield Hills resident Ida Purcell to seek help for an effort she began on a small scale in the fall of 1991.

"I had been knitting mittens and hats for a service group at Kirk in the Hills church when (church member) Ruth Peterson suggested I take them to schools in Pontiac. When I got there and realized the level of need that existed, my effort snowballed.

"I began getting things from church clothing closets, garage sales and my friends and neighbors to take to the schools. Now I take bags of whatever I can collect to 16 elementary schools. I have seen teachers cry (tears of joy) when I delivered a bag of underwear," Purcell told members of a prayer group recently assembled at Woody and Jan Wood's Bloomfield home.

Another guest that day was Peterson, who heads up the local FISH ministry. FISH of Greater Pontiac is an ecumenical lay ministry that provides emergency assistance in 15 Oakland County townships including Birmingham and West Bloomfield. Through her work with FISH, Peterson knows well the pockets of poverty.

Purcell is still amazed at her own naivete prior to going into the Pontiac schools. "I was born in Pontiac and I live five miles from where I grew up. I knew things

had to be rough but I just didn't know how rough," she said.

Purcell soon learned that the first activity on a cold day for many Pontiac teachers is to check the children for frostbite. She has seen children arrive at school wearing sandals and no socks. At one Pontiac school there are 100 kids with no coats. Teachers watch for her to arrive with the bags of clothing.

"They know exactly what each child needs," said Purcell with admiration.

A wife, mother and executive manager for a manufacturers representative firm, Purcell has researched the poverty level in the Pontiac schools. In one school, 90 percent of the students qualify for free breakfast and lunch. In others, the figure is 82 percent, 79 percent, 65 percent and so on.

Purcell's current goal, and the reason for our telling this story, is to get area schools and churches to immediately adopt one of the Pontiac elementary/middle schools and funnel outgrown clothing directly to children who need it.

This project, which has been named WOW (Ward Off Winter), should not cost any money. Rather, it is a common-sense plan that would send clean, used items from families in one school or church to needy children and their families who live but a few miles away. Some Pontiac schools have already set aside closet space for the clothing and FISH will supply charitable donation receipts for anyone who desires same.

For WOW to work, Purcell thinks sponsors should have a volunteer coordinator responsible for regular transfer of collected items. "I'm after a program that's not dependent on a particular person, but rather one in which the sponsor will keep a coordinator's position filled with a responsible person," she said.

Will such an effort be viewed as a condescending gesture? Not according to one black Pontiac principal. "For these little kids to see that white people care would make a big difference," he told Purcell.

Purcell's presentation to the prayer group made a difference. They held a couples potluck



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The WOW women: Ida Purcell (left), Eaton Curtis and Ruth Peterson arrive at a Pontiac school to deliver warm clothing destined to Ward Off Winter for needy children.

dinner, attended by 45 people, and collected money to buy coats for children. Anticipating a cache of about \$1,000, Jan Wood had contacted Burlington Coat Factory manager Mike Holzschu. He offered bargain prices.

The morning before the dinner, Purcell, Jan Wood and Ann Yonen went to Burlington and picked out \$1,300 worth of coats, most of them costing \$10, for pickup after the dinner.

When Wood counted a net take of \$2,700, she said, "The Lord blessed us with double." This enabled the women to buy 115 coats, 381 pair of underwear and socks, 61 jogging pants and sweaters, and 61 warm hats and still have \$250 left for other emergencies.

She accompanied Purcell when she delivered some of that loot to two schools just before Christmas. Also on the delivery run was Peterson and Eaton Curtis, a Detroit Country Day School senior who has collected and distributed hundreds of hats and mittens to needy children since she was a freshman.

"Curtis likes to see firsthand that the things she collects get to needy children," explained Purcell.

At Webster School, principal Don Ostrander and Chapter One teacher Carol Brigham led the

way to a clothing closet that had already been created and showed off a tutoring room awaiting more volunteers. "We have a nice partnership with Midvale School, but that's a holiday thing," Brigham explained.

At Crofoot Elementary School, the bags of clothing and mittens were momentarily left in principal Dr. Donald Robinson's office while Purcell delivered some storybooks she had scrounged, to teacher Lubertha Johnson's kindergarten room. The children squealed with excitement and Johnson exclaimed, "This must be Santa Claus! What a special treat!"

Then Robinson brought a blonde kindergarten girl into the office to try on a new warm, hooded jacket, mittens and a bright red dress. She was too shy to say much, but when she realized that the clothes were for her she never stopped smiling.

After the try-on session, school secretary Irene Christmas said: "The other teachers are waiting. They've already been through the bags."

Purcell has high hopes that WOW can get all Pontiac school children warmly clothed.



Button up: Ida Purcell (center) buttons up a new winter jacket for Tiffany Rose of Pontiac as Crofoot School principal Dr. Donald Robinson watches.



Shopping time: Ann Yonen (left), Jan Wood, Mike Holzschu and Ida Purcell select coats for needy children.



What do you think? Tiffany Rose shows off her new dress.

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