

Adopt-a-Family school uniform drive needs your help

- Sheila Stroup, The Times-Picayune
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The Adopt-A-Family uniform drive for New Orleans schoolchildren needs your help. (XiXinXing)

Here's one of the remarkable things about Kevin Buckel's Adopt-A-Family Uniform Drive: In the past 25 years, it has raised over \$1 million to provide uniforms for New Orleans schoolchildren.

"It's going good this year," he told me, when I called him last week. "The money is starting to come in. All I have to do now is let everything go in motion."

What gets him started at the beginning of every August is the loyal donors who give year after year. What helps him expand the drive is finding new donors so he can reach more schools and more students in need.

"I'm starting to get requests from the various schools now," he told me. "Every year, there seem to be more." 2017 was one of the most successful drives. It raised around \$50,000. "We were able to help 1,005 students," he said.

Buckel's drive grew out of the Adopt-A-Family program he started in 1992 to match New Orleans families in crisis with families and organizations with a desire to help.

At that time, Orleans Parish public schools had started requiring uniforms, and struggling parents kept telling him that what they needed most was uniforms for their children.

So he came up with a simple plan that still works today:

Caring people send contributions in any amount for uniforms, and school counselors and social workers identify the students most in need. They use \$50 vouchers -- enough for two new shirts and two skirts or pairs of pants -- for each student.

Everyone who donates gets a receipt for the uniform purchase, a copy of the annual audit, and a personal hand-written thank-you note from a grateful student.

"I've always believed those notes are the reason people keep wanting to give," Buckel said.

The ones from elementary school kids are often illustrated, showing rainbows and flowers and smiling children in new uniforms. Sometimes, the notes from older children or teenagers tug at your heart. They might tell of a fire or an illness or some other family tragedy.

Most, though, are short and sweet, like these:

"Thanks for letting me come to school on the first week because I wouldn't be at school without the uniform."

"Thanks for my uniforms. They fit perfect, so now I can go to class."

"Thank you for helping me with getting school uniforms. My mother did not have money for me this school year."

"You are kind to make sure I have a uniform to wear to school and more than one. That's what I'm talking about!"

"Thanks a bunch for helping me with my uniforms. I was really grateful that you guys had my size and were there when I needed you."

Each note is different, but what they all seem to be saying is, "Thank you for helping me fit in."

Here's another remarkable thing about the Adopt-A-Family Uniform Drive: All the money raised goes directly into uniforms. Adopt-A-Family is the only non-profit group I know of that has no operational expenses in its budget. Buckel and a handful of loyal

volunteers spend their time and resources to make it work. "I'm really proud that all the money people give goes directly to the kids," he said.

Here's another remarkable thing about the program: Buckel has kept it going for a quarter of a century even though he moved from New Orleans to Long Beach, Miss., to buy a health club in 1996.

"I'm from New Orleans, and you don't just give up on your city when you leave," he told me. In 2005, I wrote about the drive a few days before Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent levee break wiped out much of New Orleans and basically did away with the need for school uniforms.

The storm sent Kevin's home in Long Beach out to sea, and he lost more than a decade's worth of Adopt-A-Family records along with all his other possessions. But he kept the program alive. When he called in 2006, he assured me he would be there for the students who had come back home. "I figure families in New Orleans need help more than ever after the hurricane," he said.

Last summer, when I heard from Buckel, I was surprised to learn he was even farther from New Orleans. He and his two dogs, Scout and Maggie, now spend more than half the year in Upstate New York, where he runs a sightseeing cruise boat on the Hudson River.

He also handles marketing for Ship Island Excursions in Mississippi, and lives in Long Beach during the fall and the winter.

"We're up here March through October," he said last week. "But I can still do the drive because of the great help I have at home." The first step is for school counselors and social workers to identify the students without uniforms and to email their requests to Buckel.

Donneisha Wilson, a counselor at Morris Jeff Community School-Lopez Campus, sent her list as soon as school opened and she learned which students were most in need. "Some of them lack the most basic necessities, like uniforms and new shoes," she said. "We don't turn them away, but it's really uncomfortable for them if they don't have uniforms."

What keeps things running smoothly with the drive every year is that Cynthia Cabibi Bird at Cabibi and Cabibi Law Firm in Metairie volunteers her time to do the bookkeeping, and staff members at Pedelahore & Co., a New Orleans accounting firm, take care of the paperwork -- gathering the donations and sending out receipts and thank-you notes to donors. The company also generously provides the postage.

"They make it easy for me to keep it going from up here," Buckel said. "I just have to approve the uniform orders and make sure we get the thank-you notes from the schools."

Linda Domangue at Pedelahore & Co. started volunteering to help Buckel with the clerical work in 2013, and she looks forward to doing it every year.

Now that school has started, donations are coming in every day. "A lot of them come with really nice notes," she said, as she sorted through some on her desk. "This one says,

'God bless you for taking care of our children,' and this one says, 'Congratulations on 25 years of such a fruitful, needed effort. We are grateful for you.'

She makes copies of the notes to send on to Buckel, who dreamed up the perfect little program that through the years has helped well over 20,000 New Orleans schoolchildren. What she likes even more than the notes from the donors is the thank-you notes from the children.

""You don't want to see a child left out," Domangue said. "When you see a little girl who had no uniforms and she's just so happy to get them, it makes you feel wonderful. That's satisfaction. That's gratification."

Mail donations in any amount to Adopt-A-Family Uniform Drive, c/o Linda Domangue, Pedelahore & Co., 1010 Common St., Suite 2100, New Orleans, LA 70112.