

LOTUS REACH

Clothing Kids in Our Community

By Cheryl Wooten

Last year, while volunteering at her daughters' school, Zel Rau noticed something odd. A young kindergartener was wearing swim trunks. When asked why, he explained he had no underwear to put on so he thought this was the best thing to do. Another little boy had on a pair of oversized shorts tied in a knot around his waist with a shoelace to keep them from falling off.

Looking further, she discovered more kids with clothing issues: kids with no socks; shoes duct taped together; and some with no coats during cold weather. "It was the saddest thing to see," Zel shares. "I went home and balled my eyes out. My kids have everything and more. These kids are dealing with the embarrassment of other kids staring at them because of their clothes and shoes which keeps them from totaling focusing on their schoolwork."

Zel purchased some underwear and donated it. She was glad to help, but wanted to do more. "I asked the principal at Liberty Elementary school, if it was okay to start a School Closet where we could accept gently used clothing donations and she said 'yes'. We sent flyers home to parents and items started pouring in. Once we had a sufficient amount, we sent out Need Forms. I was wondering if we'd get any forms back." The next day, they got six. By week's end, they had 15. Zel was thrilled to put together 15 bags of gently

used clothing then added new socks and underwear that she purchased herself.

When the next round of forms came back with 43 in need, Zel's husband, Skip, said, "Zel, you need to do a fundraising event." And so, she did. She started using Wishing Trees, put on an Earth Day 5k Race and had a Wine and Canvas Event at Aftermath. Last year, she filed for 501(c)(3) status, was quickly approved and Lotus Reach was born.

Word spread and in addition to assisting five local schools-- Liberty (Chesterton), Flint Lake, Cooks Corners, and Parkview (Valpo) and Hebron Middle School—they donate clothing to needy children at area homeless shelters. Already, in 2017, they have packed over 400 bags for area schools and homeless shelters.

This November 1 – 30, look for **Lotus Reach's Christmas Wishing Trees** in area businesses. The trees have ornaments representing items needed such as shoes, jeans, shirts, winter coats, boots, gloves, etc. Donors can select one or more ornaments, purchase the items, and drop them back off at the business. Whatever items are still needed, Lotus Reach will purchase

(Top) Local high school students ran in the Lotus Reach 5k fundraiser and volunteered their time at Lotus Reach.



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Some of the 400 bags packed this year for needy children.

if they have funds available, so cash donations are greatly appreciated.

“What we’re doing is directly helping our community,” says Zel. “When I get thank you cards from schools saying we’ve changed the whole demeanor of a child, I know we’re making a difference. These kids can hold their heads up and put their shoulders back with newfound confidence.”

Lotus Reach has a dedicated group of volunteers but appreciates additional help during fundraisers and clothing drives. Zel’s husband has been an integral supporter, providing manpower for tasks small and large and donating office space in the building he owns. She also appreciates the local businesses that sponsor the 5k race and Wishing Trees. Currently, Lotus Reach is looking for a Valpo location to place a new donation bin. With the community’s continued support, they look forward to assisting more children in need.

TO LEARN MORE

visit the website www.lotusreach.org or their Facebook page. New and gently used donations placed in plastic garbage bags for protection can be dropped off in the bins outside their office at 1086 State Road 149 in Chesterton.

To host a wishing tree at your business email lotusreach@yahoo.com.



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