



Diane Burns assisting a shopper.



L-R: Linda Rodenbarger, Barb Shelton, Shelley Campbell, Ruth Rush.



Donna Battista is always ready to help.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: *The Volunteers Behind Dressed for School*

■ BY CHERYL WOOTEN-WILCOX | PHOTOS BY LISA HAUSER

At Dressed for School, every child deserves to begin the school year with confidence and dignity. This Porter County nonprofit transforms lives by providing children the opportunity to shop for new school clothes and shoes in a "retail" type environment—completely free of charge. Since its founding in 2019, Dressed for School has grown from serving 200 children in its first year to over 1,300 annually. At the heart of this mission are its dedicated volunteers, whose compassion and hard work ensure every child walks away with more than just clothes—they leave with smiles and self-esteem.

"A COMMUNITY OF EDUCATORS AND CAREGIVERS": Co-founder Lisa Hauser emphasizes how essential the volunteers are to the

program's success. "We have retired teachers, community members, and parents working hard to create a welcoming space for children to shop. Their dedication speaks volumes about their commitment to making a difference."

For Connie Knauff, a retired speech-language clinician and teacher of hearing-impaired students, volunteering has been a joyful experience since the early days of the program. "I love my time spent here. Every time is unique, and seeing the joy on kids' faces is so rewarding. One time, I helped a little girl pick out a furry winter coat. When she put it on, pulled up the hood, and grinned at me, she said, 'I'm never taking it off!'" Moments like that make it all worthwhile for Connie.



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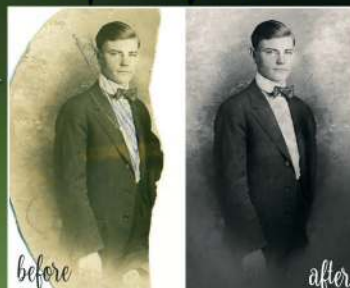
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Ruth Rush, who taught for 35 years, has been volunteering at Dressed for School three to four times a week since 2022. "Being retired, I have a lot of free time, and I enjoy volunteering for a worthwhile organization. It's fun to see returning clients who remember you."

MAKING KIDS FEEL SPECIAL

The excitement of children is a highlight for Linda Rodenbarger, a retired elementary school teacher. After 47 years in education, Linda joined Dressed for School about a year ago. "The excitement of the kids always brings a smile. The girls, especially, are like little models when trying on clothes! I love working with so many former teachers and great community people who all share a passion for making a difference in a child's life. Plus, as a volunteer, you can set your own schedule. It's such a great experience, and I'm thankful to be part of this team."

For Marilyn Hanson, another retired educator, the organization's impact is undeniable. "One of my favorite memories is delivering winter coats to Northview Elementary on the first snowy day—it was perfect! As a volunteer, I can see a direct connection with children who appreciate the unique opportunity to choose new clothing for themselves."

MORE THAN CLOTHES

Volunteers like retired teachers Donna Battista and Shelley Campbell highlight how empowering the children to choose their own clothes builds confidence. Donna shares, "Self-esteem is so important for confidence and risk-taking in the classroom." Shelley agrees stating that, "Kids love showing off their new outfits. You can see how excited they are, and it's heartwarming to witness their gratitude."

Diane Burns, a former elementary teacher, cherishes the relationships she's built. "I helped a second-grade girl in the fall. When she came back in the spring, she greeted me like we'd known each other forever. I became her personal shopper after that—it was so sweet."

For Barb Shelton, volunteering is about creating joyful experiences. "One day, three girls came in wanting matching shirts. They ended up with entire matching outfits, and the jumping, chatter, and laughter that ensued was contagious. One child even told me it was the best day ever."

A FRESH START

Retired elementary/middle school teacher Sue Martz recognizes the similarities between new school years and new clothes. "One of the perks of being an educator was the fresh start we got each year in the fall. To me, Dressed for School offers this fresh start for kids by providing new outfits and a pair of new shoes."

Kelly Bermes is interested in helping today's youth. Retiring in 2024 after 33 years as an athletic director and teacher, Kelly has witnessed firsthand the challenges that many families face. "I came to realize that we are all one emergency away from being in the same shoes as those who are struggling. I love the concept of allowing these kids to shop for new school clothes the same as their peers."

Whether it's helping kids find the perfect coat, witnessing their excitement, or seeing families' gratitude, Dressed for School's volunteers are the true embodiment of generosity and kindness.

HOW TO HELP

For those inspired by the stories of these amazing volunteers, Dressed for School offers numerous ways to get involved. Volunteers are always needed to help children shop, organize clothes, or assist with administrative tasks. Contributions of new clothing items are also greatly appreciated. To learn more, visit www.dressedforschool.org. Together, we can ensure every child in Porter County begins the school year with pride, confidence, and a smile.

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