



Operation School Bell rings for students in need

By Mary Beth Hislop



Operation School Bell, a project sponsored by the Assistance League of Los Altos, will equip more than 250 needy local students with school supplies when the academic year begins. For more than five years, league members have gathered in August to sort and pack new school supplies for elementary, middle and high school students.

Volunteers filled the pink, purple, blue or black backpacks with crayons, pens, pencils, paper, binders, notebooks, calculators and other school items depending on students' needs.

"It's stuff pertinent to their grades," said Joan Del Castillo, Assistance League vice president of resource development.

Volunteers from the Community Services Agency later retrieved the backpacks loaded with supplies for distribution to eligible families from the organization's Mountain View facility Aug. 18 and 19, before school begins.

"The request has really increased this year," said CSA Associate Director Maureen Wadiak. "These families are so living on the edge, financially."

Wadiak said the packs are distributed on a first-come, first-serve basis. The 250 packs are already claimed, with 25 students on the waiting list.

"And the calls are still coming," she said.

While other school-supplies programs in Santa Clara County are having difficulties meeting the escalating need during a weak economy, Wadiak said the league's consistent commitment through the years helps the agency meet its goals.

“We couldn’t do it without the continued support of the Assistance League,” Wadiak said. “They’re an incredible organization.”

“For five years, we’ve maintained our quantity,” Del Castillo said.

The league also donates shoe vouchers to CSA for underprivileged school-age children under the Step-n-Go program, another project of Operation School Bell.

Wadiak said individuals often donate school materials and this year, Carlson Wagonlit Travel will donate supplies. Still, the league is CSA’s core sponsor.

This year, the league allocated \$3,500 for the school supplies and member volunteers shopped for the best bargains.

The Assistance League’s major fundraiser, the Costume Bank, raises money for the school program. Located at State and Third streets in Los Altos, the Costume Bank rents costumes year-round that subsidize the group’s philanthropic projects, including H.O.M.E., low-cost housing for short-term Stanford patients and their families; Hug-a-Bear, teddy bears for pediatric patients at Kaiser Hospital in Santa Clara; and vintage fashion shows for convalescent and retirement homes.

Del Castillo said philanthropic activity is on the rise in Los Altos. The Assistance League’s teenage offshoot, Assisteens, has a waiting list for interested volunteers.

“There are about 30 young teen members – it’s an astonishing high,” she said. “We want the community to know what good things we do here.”

For more information, call 941-2610 or e-mail costumebank@juno.com.

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