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HEARTFELT HELP

ASSISTANCE LEAGUE OF ST. LOUIS
by alexa beattie

SOMETIMES, when a woman is running for her life, she doesn't have time for shoes. An overnight bag is the last thing on her mind. She can do without face cream or a toothbrush; escape is her only concern. But enter Assistance League of St. Louis, an organization of volunteers that scopes out different needs of underserved St. Louisans and sets out to meet them. The needs are specific; the ways they are met, sensitively conceived. Take, for instance, Project ROSE (Raise Our Self Esteem), which provides gift bags of personal care items to women in emergency shelters. Or the new ASK kits (assault survivor kits) assembled by the league, which supply new clothing to victims of sexual assault who may have had to surrender their own as evidence. "These women come in with nothing," says president Kathy Reese.


The Assistance League of St. Louis is one of 121 chapters nationally and was formed 29 years ago. It has 416 members (30 percent of whom volunteer full-time; one of whom is a man) and no paid staff. Members, Reese says, come from all walks of St. Louis life—retired businesswomen and nurses, part-time school teachers and realtors. "The ways we help are very much by design. We look for niches," says Reese, who was a volunteer for seven years prior to her one-year appointment as president. "We help the underserved and the not-served-at-all."

Children also are the recipients of this gentle kindness: Operation Hug delivers teddy bears to hospitals and shelters; My Own Fun Stuff refers to toys and activities for quiet play supplied to hospitalized children. (Last year, 90 members distributed 24,881 activity packets to 17 area hospitals).

The local chapter's largest program, Operation School Bell, provides uniforms to carefully selected children in 42 schools across St. Louis City and County. Over the span of 58 days, nearly 3,500 children who qualify for free or reduced lunch are bussed to the nonprofit's headquarters in Ellisville for measuring and fitting. Each child then receives two pairs of pants, three shirts, a fleece jacket, six pairs of underwear, six pairs of socks, a toothbrush and toothpaste. "You wouldn't believe how many kids are excited about getting a toothbrush," Reese says.

Meanwhile, in the fall and spring, Steps to Success—in partnership with Shoe Carnival—fits and gives footwear to more than 3,300 children at 30 area elementary schools. The shoes are athletic, current and acceptably cool. Three pairs of socks also are included. "It makes them so happy. They feel like they fit in," Reese says.

In addition to the necessities Project ROSE supplies at shelters, are 'first night bags.' These contain what Reese calls 'comforts'—slippers and nightgowns, comfy things to ease distress and help restore a battered sense of self. Once a month, with the same intention, the league delivers party supplies to the shelters—food and a big cake. "Simple things," Reese says. "Things to lift the spirit."

To support its programs, Assistance League of St. Louis holds its annual Imagine! gala Oct. 8 at Edward Jones Atrium. The evening includes cocktails, dinner, silent and live auctions. Tickets are \$150 per person. 

ASSISTANCE LEAGUE OF ST. LOUIS HOLDS ITS ANNUAL IMAGINE! GALA OCT. 8 AT EDWARD JONES ATRIUM. THE EVENING INCLUDES COCKTAILS, DINNER, AND SILENT AND LIVE AUCTIONS. PICTURED ON THE COVER: IMAGINE! HONORARY CHAIRS VICKI AND DOUG HILL WITH TWO OPERATION SCHOOL BELL PARTICIPANTS. FOR TICKETS AND INFORMATION, CALL 636.227.6200 OR VISIT ALSTL.ORG.