

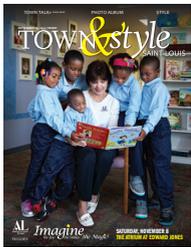


september 24, 2014



PHOTO: COLIN MILLER OF STRAUSS PEYTON

VOLUNTEER LISA BREER WITH STUDENTS



SCHOOL-READY

ASSISTANCE LEAGUE OF SAINT LOUIS

by rebecca koenig

AN 8-YEAR-OLD GIRL MISSES SCHOOL BECAUSE SHE HAS NO SHOES.

An 11-year old boy hangs his head in shame when kids make fun of his shabby clothing. Three siblings dread waiting at the bus stop on chilly fall mornings because their parents can't afford to buy them warm clothes.

Assistance League of St. Louis identifies community needs such as these and develops, implements and funds ways to meet them. "One of the most important things we do is make sure children have decent clothes for school," says president Marilyn Panter. Established in 1987 as a chapter of the National Assistance League, the organization helps St. Louisans of all ages with a broad range of programs. "We also provide necessities for women and children in shelters, activity kits for hospital patients, and teddy bears for emergency responders to distribute to kids and seniors in traumatic situations," she explains. "We help in whatever way we can."

Last year, ALSL's Operation School Bell program supplied more than 3,500 students in 24 area public schools with uniforms, sweatshirts, underwear and socks, along with personal hygiene kits. Steps to Success, a sister program in partnership with Shoe Carnival, fit more than 2,500 kids from 28 schools with new athletic shoes. "We've expanded the program to include a new book for each child," Panter says. "Many have never had a book of their own. You should see the look of joy on their faces!"

ALSL has no paid staff, "just 349 volunteers with huge

hearts," she says. "Last year, we contributed more than 55,700 hours of service to 39,000 individuals." But the need never stops, and the waiting list keeps growing. To help fund programs, ALSL operates Fantastic Finds, a resale shop on Olive Boulevard near Mason Road. "To celebrate the shop's 10th anniversary, we're adding 1,500 square feet of floor space to better serve customers," she says. Another major source of income is the organization's annual fall gala dinner auction. This year's event, Imagine!, takes place Nov. 8 in the Edward Jones Atrium. Linda Welborn serves as chairperson, with Lynne Turley as vice chair.

Simple things like new clothes and shoes can have a significant impact, notes ALSL president-elect Jane Harbron. "In a recent survey, 86 percent of teachers report that many students have benefited socially or academically from the supplied uniforms, and more than half agreed that the uniforms improve classroom discipline," she says.

Parents also provide feedback. "We get the most amazing responses," says marketing communications VP Sue Bassett. "Parents tell us the uniforms improve their children's self-image, help them focus on learning, and keep them from being bullied because they can't afford trendy brand-name clothes." But the most gratifying responses come from the kids, she adds. "One little girl said to the volunteer who fitted her, "Thank you! I love you!" It made our day. When kids feel confident, it gets the school year off to a strong start—and forms the foundation for solid academic achievement." &

IMAGINE!, A GALA BENEFITING ASSISTANCE LEAGUE OF ST. LOUIS, TAKES PLACE NOV. 8 AT EDWARD JONES ATRIUM. TICKETS START AT \$150; \$1,500 FOR A PATRON TABLE OF 10. PICTURED ON THE COVER: ALSL VOLUNTEER MAUREEN AMICK WITH STUDENTS FROM FAIRVIEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN JENNINGS. FOR MORE INFORMATION, CALL 636.227.6200 OR VISIT ALSTL.ORG.

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