

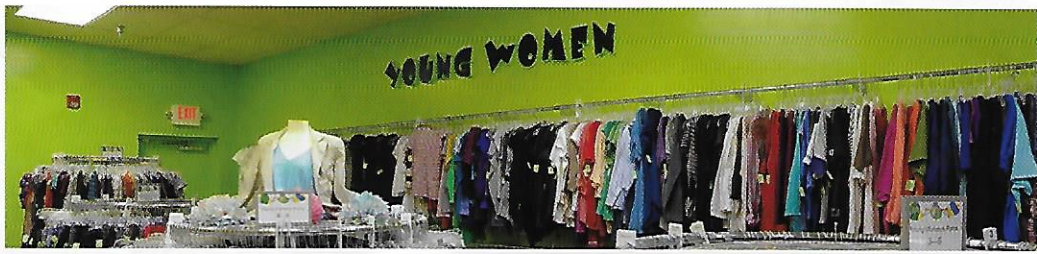


Clothes To Kids: Helping the Community, One Child at a Time

By Luke Cross

Back-to-school shopping season is in full swing, and families across Pinellas County are making sure their kids are prepared for the upcoming semester. Unfortunately, not every family can afford to supply their students with the essentials, especially when it comes to the expensive clothing that growing children need every year. That's why Clothes To Kids (CTK) has been helping to provide families with the school clothing they need for more than a decade.

Clothes To Kids is a Clearwater-based nonprofit organization, which provides school clothes to low-income or in-crisis, school-age children in Pinellas County free of charge. An eligible child can choose a week's worth of clothing, which is called a wardrobe and includes a pair of shoes, five new pairs of underwear, five tops, an optional dress and a jacket in winter. Any student currently receiving reduced-price lunch through Pinellas County Schools is eligible, and letters of referral from a social worker or school faculty member are also accepted.



thing a family has to worry about."

Eligible students may shop by appointment at a Clothes To Kids store—there is one in St. Petersburg and one in Clearwater—twice in a calendar year. This adds up to the organization providing an incredible amount of clothing to the community.

"We know on average we're providing between 10,000 and 12,000 wardrobes each year," Jacobs said. "We began serving the Pinellas community in 2003, and now in 2017 we have provided over 121,000 wardrobes to children in need."

The process of gathering and delivering these clothes is supported by volunteers at every step. Jacobs said: "We use between 1,500 and 1,800 volunteer hours a month. Some of our volunteers have been here longer than I have!"

Clothes To Kids partners with various local charities to serve a common clientele, Jacobs explained: "We work with a lot of the homeless agencies in the community, they call on us to provide their clients with clothes, as well. We have great community partnerships with a lot of organizations because they know that's one less thing they have to provide if a family needs it."

Fundraisers and donation drives play a key role in keeping Clothes To Kids' stores well stocked. This past July the 44th Annual Sunrise Sale, hosted by the Downtown Business Association, raised over \$1,200 for CTK.

Currently, CTK is in the middle of their Drop Off Your Drawers campaign, a donation drive for new packages of underwear. Jacobs believes campaigns like Drop Off Your Drawers and their upcoming footwear-oriented drive, Kick One Back, are vital to keeping costs down for the nonprofit.

"We will provide 55,000 new pairs of underwear this year and every year," Jacobs said. "If we were to purchase the amount needed, it would be around \$114,000."

Jacobs said that donations are key to providing so many children in need with clothing that they otherwise would go without: "When the community gives us clothes, it helps keep our costs down, which directly helps those in need. And we know that the clothes are out there, it's just a matter of getting the word out."

If you would like to donate gently used clothing or new socks and underwear, you may drop off donations at the St. Petersburg store, Monday through Friday, 9am to 1pm, at 2168 34th Street South. Or the Clearwater store, Monday through Friday, 9am to 5pm, at 1059 North Hercules Avenue. There is also a clothing bin available after hours. For guidelines on what types and sizes of clothing they need, to learn about volunteer opportunities, to refer a family to shop, or to make an online monetary donation, please visit www.clothestokids.org.

"It's awful to know that some of these families are struggling to provide just basics," said Jennifer Jacobs, development director at CTK. "We know that we do clothing and we do it well, so we focus on that, and it's one less