

Southern Oakland  
**TOWNSHIP** *Living*  
AN EXCLUSIVE NEWSLETTER FOR THE RESIDENTS OF SOUTHERN OAKLAND TOWNSHIP  
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*Turn to the Making a Difference section to read about how the Assistance League of Southeastern Michigan has a program, Operation School Bell, that is making a remarkable difference in the lives of children.*

# making a DIFFERENCE

## FREE CLOTHES, FREE SHOPPING FOR KIDS IN NEED, THANKS TO OPERATION SCHOOL BELL

By: Amy Dicesce



During the month of October, more than 3,000 school-age children in the tri-county area were treated to a free shopping excursion, where they were able to choose new clothing and coats, provided to them at no cost by Operation School Bell, the signature program of Assistance League of Southeastern Michigan. They shopped at school gymnasiums, which were transformed by members and community volunteers into well-organized and nicely displayed department stores, suitable for free, kid-friendly shopping experiences.



Assistance League volunteers act as personal shoppers, helping children find items that are the right fit. Children get free clothing, coats, hats and gloves, underwear, hygiene kits and toiletries, books and duffel bags.

The Assistance League members set up five make-shift stores this October, to provide necessities to children in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb Counties. In existence since 1995, and having served over 20,000 local children so far, Operation School Bell sets up racks and tables in school gymnasiums and allows each student to shop for the following new items: a winter coat, hat and gloves, shirts, underwear and socks, hygiene kit, a book, and a duffel bag.

“It is often the only ‘new’ clothing the children have ever received,” said Barbara Donohoe, resident of Oakland Township and president of the Assistance League of Southeastern Michigan. “And each child gets a personal shopper to help them find the right size and make good selections.”



Cary Riggs helping Derrick Reed-Hill select new pants.



Camille Doerr, who has experienced many Operation School Bell shopping extravaganzas, says the thrill never gets old. “We are helping families in need provide basic necessities to their children. This provides a tremendous boost to students’ self-esteem and even school attendance, which sometimes suffers if children aren’t appropriately dressed for the elements and the walk to school.”

Operation School Bell shopping events were held at the following locations and served more than 3,000 kids in just five weeks.

- **October 1 and October 8:** Events at three schools, in Eastpointe and Van Dyke school districts, served 972 Macomb County students.
- **October 15 and October 22:** Two Oakland County events served 600 students in Pontiac and 300 students in the Rochester area.
- **October 29:** Several Wayne County schools were served at a Detroit gymnasium, where over 700 students from 13 schools received clothing. (Additionally, another 300 kids were provided with clothes at the Children’s Center of Detroit in August.)



Community Volunteer, Jean Dertouzos, helps Leola Riojas select new pants at Herrington.

Assistance League members work with school leaders to identify kids in need. A third-grade teacher, whose class benefitted from an Operation School Bell shopping experience earlier in the month said, “In my 22 years, this was the most exhilarating and monumental experience. There were tears of joy and words of great appreciation from our kids and our families. At 3:18 p.m., in room 14, the students enjoyed a mini-fashion show with the class proudly displaying their new wears. It was an incredible event.”

New merchandise is purchased and stored all year long, by volunteers from the Assistance League. The ReSale Connection shop in downtown Rochester (204 S. Main Street) uses its profits and financial assistance to purchase new clothing in all sizes for area children. These items are put to good use, so kids have some new clothing to get them through the start of the school year and the beginning of winter. Thanks to thrifty, off-season, volunteer shoppers and partnerships with many local businesses, Assistance League is able to outfit children for about \$75 each (including a warm coat). For students who wear uniforms, appropriate uniform items are also available.

While elementary children shop at their schools, middle-school children get vouchers and personal shoppers to guide them at local Kohl’s and JC Penney stores. Each student has \$100 to spend and they are allowed to choose items for school. Over 400 students in the tri-county area have taken part in these store shopping events.

Additionally, contributions are collected each year through generous donors at the Mistletoe Marketplace luncheon and fundraiser, held each November. For more information, visit: <http://www.semich.AssistanceLeague.org>.

**SIDEBAR:** Assistance League of Southeastern Michigan, founded in 1993 and serving Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, is a nonprofit, all-member volunteer organization whose purpose is to clothe, feed, educate and comfort children and adults through community-based programs. One hundred percent of Assistance League’s profits are returned back to local communities through their philanthropic programs. For more information, please visit Assistance League ReSale Connection, 204 S. Main St., Rochester, 248-656-0414, or <http://www.semich.AssistanceLeague.org>.