

By: Helen Wolt

Back to School Bash returns with supplies, services



The Spirit of Giving Network of Boca Raton is setting up operations in Delray Beach this weekend to serve needy families. Its Back to School Bash will outfit 4,000 area students with shoes, uniforms, backpacks and school supplies.

The invitation-only event takes place at Village Academy. Friday night, volunteers will transform the gymnasium into an emporium. On Saturday, as students arrive they'll be paired with a personal shopper. Each student is escorted through the aisles to select the items they like.

"They get to feel that they went into a store and shopped for school supplies," said Wendy Friswell, Spirit of Giving's executive director. "When they exit the Bash, they are prepared for school."

While the children are trying on shoes and filling backpacks, their parents will be treated to a Family Health Carnival. Boca Raton Regional Hospital is offering free health screenings and immunizations. Barbers will provide complimentary haircuts for children.

"It's very organized," Friswell said. The nonprofit's 250 volunteers form teams and are assigned specific stations. By 5 p.m. Saturday, the Back to School Bash clears out and Village Academy returns to normal.

To pull off the large-scale event, Spirit of Giving partners with 60 organizations.

One such partner is In Jacob's Shoes. This is the fourth year the nonprofit has participated in the Delray giveaway. Based in Pompano Beach, it has distributed more than 50,000 new and gently-worn shoes in South Florida since 2009.

"We're very spread out," said Cynthia Freedman, director and co-founder. "There's such a tremendous need for this. It gets greater and greater every year."

To deliver footwear to Delray's Back to School Bash, In Jacob's Shoes will rent a truck. Freedman will also bring volunteers to fit the shoes. Each child's foot is measured before they pick out a pair that pleases them.

"They're proud when they're wearing a nice pair of shoes," Freedman said. "They can go to school with some dignity. Looking at somebody's feet says a lot."

The Spirit of Giving event makes an economic impact on the community, Friswell said.

"These families do not have the money to go out and purchase these items for their kids," she said. School supplies won't be on the shopping list if it means not being able to pay the rent or buy groceries. New sneakers aren't even a consideration.

"They don't have the money to stretch to meet that need. That's the impact we're having in Boca and Delray," Friswell added.

She estimates the value of goods families take home is more than \$150 per child. The network's wholesale purchasing power, benefactors and volunteers make the event happen.

"Volunteers are our most valued resource," Friswell said. "Volunteers make this event happen."