

DOBYTOWN KIWANIS WINS NI-DISTRICT SIGNATURE PROJECT AWARD

Teachers Marilyn and Marv Heckman started the project 26 years ago after they were contacted by the United Way. The couple are local teachers who used to go out and buy and fill 20 backpacks that were customized to the needs of those students. That's no longer the case.

"It's a rather generic thing," Nikels said. It has to be that way, given the need that led to more than 1,100 backpacks being given out last year. "If every parent actually signed up that is eligible, we'd have 1,700 more," Nikels stated.

As it stands the Back 2 School Link Backpack Project has provided more than 11,800 backpacks to students who needed them since its inception. That includes 7,800 in the last eight years as the need has continued to grow in this central Nebraska city of roughly 33,500 people.

The children who receive the backpacks are from families that also have signed up for the free and reduced cost lunch program at the Kearney Public Schools. The United Way encourages those families to apply for the program. No family data is collected by the Dobytown Kiwanis on the eligible families, and in the most recent years it has been confidential.

The project always takes place just before the start of school on the first Monday and Tuesday in August. While no Kiwanis partner is involved, strong support comes from the Nebraska-Iowa District Foundation on the backpacks.

More help comes from Goodfellows of Kearney, fellow Kiwanis groups the Kearney Noon and Golden K Clubs, Ashley Furniture that allows donations to be stored at its warehouse, Wal-Mart via discounted school supplies, the CHI Good Samaritan Hospital Pediatric Department, the Kearney Public Schools Foundation, and the Kearney Area Community Foundation, plus many individual citizens.

Dozens of Dobytown Kiwanis Club members annually donate hundreds of hours to the project. "Anybody that wants to help," Nikels summarized.

The Back 2 School Project has become a significant community event as families, businesses and organizations rally to show their support for young people as they return to school, hopefully, on the right foot and with everything they need.

The school district provides a list of the needed supplies, such as crayons and scissors, dry erase markers and pens of different colors, colored pencils and notebooks, among other things. Those items may be picked up during the year by club members, but often are purchased during a Stuff-the-Bus event at Wal-Mart in July.

"We do that about a week to ten days before we do the backpacks," Nikels said. "We do that so parents are more aware that – 'Hey, school's coming up!'" All the support means the entire backpack, about a \$40 value, can be done for \$9.64.

The club has a plan when it comes to packing the backpacks, Nikels said. They gather to pack on Monday night and then distribute on Tuesday, with a few backpacks saved for Wednesday morning to give to the parents who work evenings.

"We run a tight ship," Nikels emphasized. "We can usually do a thousand (backpacks) in an hour and 15 minutes." Students can help fill the backpacks but are not allowed to keep one until the next night when they are handed out to their classmates.

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“We don’t want children to be embarrassed,” she explained. “Some people just don’t want other people to know.”

Support has been known to come from completely unexpected sources. “We had a man come last August. No one knew him,” Nikels recalled. She then learned he had stopped in Kearney on a trip and read that there might be a need for help to pack the backpacks. He spontaneously volunteered. “It just blew us away.”

That is just one example of how the Back 2 School project is not just a great publicity and recruiting tool, it’s changing lives. “We receive all kinds of comments,” Nikels said. “One year I had a grandmother come up to me and she’s crying. “That really touches your heart . . . You really know you’re doing a good thing.”

Then there was the family that previously had benefitted from the program. Last year they came back and donated supplies. “It’s our turn to give back,” she was told.

Still, the biggest thing is the club members know they are helping kids. The best reward, the ones that cannot be given a monetary value, are the smiles. “That’s all I need,” Nikels sighed. “They want to go through the backpack right then and there.”

2017 Winner

The Kiwanis Miracle League at Principal Park in Des Moines, Iowa, was the Nebraska-Iowa District’s entry into the inaugural 2017 Kiwanis International Signature Project contest. It became the contest’s first Gold Award winner, presented at the International Convention in Paris, France in July.

Barely a figment of the imagination in 2007, Des Moines area clubs, spearheaded by the Des Moines (Downtown) Club, raised \$1.5 million in 18 months, designed and built the ballpark, and played its first exhibition season in September 2008.

The ball park includes a specially designed rubberized playing surface, ADA-approved restrooms, a full concession stand, and covered picnic pavilion. It’s a safe and secure environment where wheel chairs can easily maneuver the bases and visually impaired kids don’t have to worry about tripping and falling. Now, some 250 kids with special needs play on 14 teams in two seasons each year. And each year, 3-4,000 volunteers (from 12 year-olds to senior citizens) act as “angels in the outfield”. Smiles and high-fives abound! After all, doesn’t “every child deserve a chance to play baseball?”

About the Signature Project Award

The Nebraska-Iowa Signature Project award is given to that project that best meets four criteria: 1) recurring; 2) enhances the Kiwanis brand; 3) demonstrates significant impact in terms of money raised or children served; and 4) strengthens membership and partnership opportunities.

Dobytown’s “Back 2 School Link Backpack Project” was one of five outstanding signature projects recognized this year by the Nebraska-Iowa District. The other four projects were the:

- “Marion Barbecue Rendezvous” sponsored by the Marion Metro Kiwanis Club
- “Pasta for Pantries” project sponsored by the North Platte Kiwanis Club
- “Hy-Noon 5K Run/Walk” sponsored by the Spencer Hy-Noon Kiwanis Club

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- “Secret Santa” project sponsored by the Washington AM-ers Kiwanis Club.
Andy Roberts, The Daily Record