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## Lafayette's Way Side Inn Hosts Operation School Bell Celebration

By Cathy Tyson



Veronica Grant, President of Assistance League of Diablo Valley and a volunteer outside of the Wayside Inn Thrift Shop. Photos Cathy Tyson

What started in 1994 by providing 67 students with clothing in the Walnut Creek School District has blossomed, and has served an astonishing 50,000 students over the past 49 years, all through the hard work and dedication of the many volunteers of the Assistance League of Diablo Valley through their signature Operation School Bell program.

OSB is epic recycling at its finest: Donated items don't end up in landfills, but are resold for cash which goes toward clothing needy children in Contra Costa County.

Celebrating this milestone at a recent event in front of the Lafayette's Way Side Inn Thrift Shop, President Veronica Grant explained that money raised to support OSB and their other philanthropic efforts is due to the "undeniable shopping skills, generous donors and countless volunteers" that give their time and resources to the cause.

Ground zero for donations and sales, the historical Way Side Inn, adjacent to the Park Theater, was originally a grist mill constructed in 1853. It later morphed into a hotel and tavern, and was ultimately purchased by the Assistance League in 1978 for \$120,000.

The Assistance League of Diablo Valley is just one of 120 chapters of the Assistance League, a national nonprofit organization that puts caring and commitment into action. The local Diablo Valley chapter serves 49 schools in five school districts through OSB.

Christina Bowman, principal of El Monte Elementary School in Concord, spoke about what OSB means from a recipient's perspective. With just under 500 kids, her school has 65 percent of its students eligible for free and reduced price lunches and 40 percent of the kids speak Spanish at home.

In the surrounding neighborhoods, "parents are struggling just to pay rent, buy gasoline to get to work and to put food on the table. That doesn't leave a lot for clothing" said Bowman.

School uniforms have made a huge difference, said the principal, explaining that since the uniform policy has started, the entire student body's scores have improved along with conduct.

She recently met with a new family with three kids that was registering for school and could see the look of panic when the mom heard about the uniform requirement. OSB came to the rescue, the students were fit with uniforms on the spot, some other necessities and even given a gift card for shoes. "The mom left with a smile on her face," Bowman said.

Assemblywoman Susan Bonilla also addressed the gathering, praising the kindness of volunteers who care for children in a practical, meaningful way, creating a ripple effect of giving.

Perched near the apple juice and brownies were two of the hardest working puppets in town: Melody James and Renaldo Rodriguez, along with their wrangler and voice, vice president of public relations Linda Patton.

The trio visit kindergarten through third grade classrooms eight times per month to talk about things that may be bothering the students. The current topic of discussion is bullying. Puppets are provided through the "Kids on the Block" program to the Assistance League.

In addition to OSB, other efforts funded by the Way Side Inn shop include college scholarships for young adults, food donations, baby bags for infants at risk, emergency clothing to survivors of assault, and more. To learn more about the Assistance League of Diablo Valley and the popular Way Side Inn Thrift Shop, visit their website at [diablovalley.assistanceleague.org](http://diablovalley.assistanceleague.org).

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