



Published May 1st, 2019

Community "pack-out" party to help homeless students

By Diane Claytor

Living in a community of million-plus dollar homes, winter ski trips to Tahoe and summer family vacations to Hawaii, Europe or Disneyland, it's often easy to forget that not everyone is so fortunate. In fact, in the Mt. Diablo Unified School District, with schools only a short drive away from Lamorinda's bucolic communities, there are 650 homeless students. That's 650 children without their own bedroom, many without an actual roof over their heads; some are living temporarily with family or friends, some are in shelters, others are sleeping in cars.

When Sharon McGinnis Girdlestone, an Orinda mom and entrepreneur with an amazingly huge heart, learned about this, she found it "shocking and heart-wrenching" and knew she had to do something to help these children. She spoke with Sandra Wohali, administrator of MDUSD's Homeless Outreach Program for Education (HOPE), then talked with local nonprofit agencies and friends, who then contacted their friends and soon a movement was born.

Wohali confirmed what McGinnis Girdlestone assumed: most of these students can't afford hygiene items and often come to school without bathing or brushing their teeth.

"People in this community are so generous," McGinnis Girdlestone noted. "Once you tell them about a need, they're happy to jump in and do something." And so many already have.

With the goal of providing every one of those 650 homeless students a backpack filled with a toothbrush and toothpaste, deodorant, hairbrush, and cleaning wipes, Lamorinda residents are eagerly contributing to the project. Moraga's Courtney Brockmeyer, CEO of Sydney Paige backpacks, provided the backpacks; 500 toothbrushes were recently received and "one parent donated 1,500 body washes and lotions," McGinnis Girdlestone proudly noted. But there's still a lot more needed.

As of April 26, only 38 percent of the goal had been reached. "We're asking people to sponsor as many items as they can so that we not only provide full hygiene kits to all 650 homeless students, but also help them feel loved, cared for and believed in," McGinnis Girdlestone wrote. The hope is to also have a personally written note of encouragement included in each backpack.

It's so easy to do: simply go to sydney Paige.roonga.com and choose the products you'd like to purchase for this very worthwhile endeavor. McGinnis Girdlestone acknowledges that these products are a higher quality than ones you may typically find at the local dollar store because, she said, "These kids deserve to have something a little nicer than a simple plastic toothbrush."

On May 9 from 4 to 7 p.m., there will be a "community pack-out party" to place all the items into the backpacks and write brief caring notes. A very generous Orinda homeowner is offering her Wilder home for this gathering and participants are encouraged to bring their children to help with the assembly. To sign up for the "pack out party," email McGinnis Girdlestone at sharon.mcginnis@gmail.com. "We'll have a blast giving back together as a community," she promises.

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