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# Stuff the Bus

By: Jennifer Maune

Shot on location at Chicot Primary School and Early Childhood Center

Many children look forward to arriving on the first day of school with new notebooks, crayons, and backpacks. But it's a different story for children whose families cannot afford these items. Each August, thousands of Little Rock School District children start the school year without the necessary supplies to succeed academically. To meet this community need, the Junior League of Little Rock has implemented a program, Stuff the Bus, to help children in this community.

The Junior League of Little Rock focuses its efforts on promoting volunteerism, improving the community through effective leadership, and developing the potential of women. The organization's community projects are developed to protect and empower children, support and educate parents, and improve the health, education and welfare of women.

Stuff the Bus is a program created to provide basic school supplies to children in the Little Rock School District elementary schools who are "most in need." This program assists them with their studies and helps build self-esteem. The Little Rock School District (LRSD) has approximately 6,000 students in the elementary level grades who qualify for this program.

The Junior League of Little Rock wants to enable these children to receive the best education possible by giving them the necessary resources to succeed. "We are committed to improving the learning experience for the children in Little Rock," stated Courtney McLarty, the President of the Junior League of Little Rock. "We believe that one of the best things we can do for the community is to help ensure that children in Little Rock have the tools necessary to succeed in school."

Stuff the Bus was launched in the spring of 2006. In its first year, back-to-school items were provided for the 518 students at Watson Elementary. The program has now grown to include four schools. Baseline Elementary, Geyer Springs Elementary, Chicot Elementary, and Watson Elementary are benefactors of the program that aids approximately 2,000 students. Since the program's inception, 5,000 students have been provided with supplies.

Geyer Springs is the newest school that was added to the program. "We were so pleased to add Geyer Springs this year," Lori Jolley, chair of Stuff the Bus 2009, notes. "We found out that we are their only partner in education. They haven't had anyone helping them meet their needs."

The Stuff the Bus committee works diligently through the summer to collect, assemble, and distribute the school supplies before the first day of classes. The supplies are gathered through two drives and through purchasing the remaining materials, and this year will be delivered to the schools on August 6th and 7th.

When the program started, the focus was on providing supplies to the students; Stuff the Bus now provides other materials for the teachers and classrooms such as tissue, hand sanitizer, disinfectant spray, soap, protractors, dictionaries, and sticky notes. The Junior League of Little Rock has partnered with Children International, a program of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Perks.com and Verizon Wireless to grow this program. The total spent this year on supplies was approximately \$35,000. While the program has grown, there are always more materials that are needed.

"As a former teacher of 10 years, I knew there was a great need among our students. Those that come to school without their materials have a huge disadvantage, and often feel incapable and behind on learning," Lori added. "Even though they often do what they can to help, teachers cannot provide these materials for everyone. Some students even need a pencil sent home at night just so they can finish their homework."

The Junior League of Little Rock is already planning for the next school year. There is a supply drive on August 22<sup>nd</sup> from 9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m., where specific supplies (wide ruled notebook paper, pencils, and 24 count crayons) can be dropped off at the Little Rock Zoo. The Junior League is looking for opportunities to partner with the community through grants, community support and corporate supply partners. Through the financial support of corporate partners, they hope to expand the program to reach all 6,000 needy students.

photograph by christy hollingshead



Kneeling: Ashley Priest, Lori Jolley and Betsy Mowery  
Standing: Anna Carol Parrish, Jennifer Owens, Amy Lasley and Kimberly Aitkins  
Principals in Bus: Dr. Eleanor Cox, Baseline Elementary; Richard Mills, Geyer Springs Elementary; Shoutell Richardson, Chicot Primary and Early Childhood Center