

Stormy's Corner

Community groups, city of Chandler team up to fill backpacks with school supplies for students in need returning to classes

BY STORMY LIGHT

The start of a brand new school year is almost here and students are rolling their shopping carts down aisles of jumbo highlighters, mechanical pencils, and a rainbow assortment of binders. With the mad rush to be prepared for the first day of school, Chandler is working hard to make this transition manageable for all families.

"It's important to have our students ready for the first day of school," Vice Mayor Kevin Hartke said. "But none of it would be possible without our business, nonprofit and faith community partners and volunteers who make it happen. We recognize their incredible contribution and are grateful for their continued service to the community."

Chandler has always used its resources as a community to come up with clever and innovative ways to make sure every child is confident and prepared for school. Operation Back to School is a service-oriented project that has successfully allowed students and families to obtain many necessities for the upcoming school year. With a joint coalition of volunteers, organizations, companies, faith groups, and the city, this project runs smoothly and effectively. These groups wake up early and, with caffeine in hand, unload boxes of backpacks, supplies, shoes, and clothes. During the event, students and families pick up supplies, slip on new shoes and even have the opportunity to get their hair cut. In addition, educational opportunities and information about

after-school programs are available.

This event, which takes place 7 to 11 a.m. July 22 at Chandler High School, is giving incredible educational opportunities to empower youth in Chandler. One organization that takes part in the event, ICAN, works to educate and inspire youth through life-skills programs.

"Operation Back to School is a vital partnership in the Chandler community," ICAN CEO Shelby Pedersen said. "Without the resources that this collaborative provides to kids, many would return to school without the basics. When you see a child's eyes light up because they've been handed a brand new backpack, you also realize that it's about much more than supplies. It's about arming kids with the confidence they need to start the school year on the right foot. The impact is immeasurably important to the academic success of our kids."

Pedersen said being able to feel positive walking down the hallway assures that these kids are focusing on school and not about what's missing from their backpacks.

Niki Tapia, community resource coordinator for the city, organizes the event and works with the groups taking part in it. She describes the impact volunteers and organizations have on the overall outcome of the event. "It's amazing how the word 'community' truly encapsulates this event," Tapia says. "There are amazing community groups, like the Chandler Service Club, who



(Photo special to SanTanSun News)

donate more than 300 pairs of shoes each year. Faith groups work directly with Title I schools in Chandler to provide school uniforms for their students in need. Nonprofit groups, like Shear Outreach, will bring their mobile-style trailer and provide free haircuts at the event. And most notably, the Operation Back to School planning committee is representative of so many organizations in Chandler and works collaboratively to plan this event each year."

By identifying the needs of families in Chandler and working toward a solution, leaders like Tapia and Pedersen are equipping these kids with the tools to have bright futures. The cooperation, patience, and communication that were needed to make this event possible are a service that will not go unnoticed by these amazing kids.

Stormy Light is a 15-year old Hamilton High School student who writes a column in the SanTan Sun News. 📝