

Students organize free shopping day to support United Way

Students at Montour High School and David E. Williams Middle School teamed up on several philanthropic initiatives this year through a new pilot program started by the United Way. Those efforts culminated in students organizing a free shopping day event at the high school cafeteria Feb. 15 where anyone could browse donated clothing and contribute a recommended \$5 donation to support the United Way's initiatives.

The program, called the Champion School District Initiative, was designed by United Way representatives Janice Sauers and Kevin Platz. The goal, the two said, was to engage students in volunteerism and fundraising while helping them understand the challenges some in their communities face.

Montour was one of four schools that participated in the program this school year, alongside Gateway, North Hills and Northgate.

"This is somewhat wrapped around the issues that we see inside each school district based on 2-1-1 data," Platz said. "2-1-1 is a social service hotline that people can call to get help, whether it's rental relief or food insecurity or help with a gas bill, or just help getting elderly parents to a doctor's appointment...It's a vital resource inside our communities that not a lot of people use, and so we really set out to honor the kids and to make sure that we were trying to get them to recognize that there are issues inside our communities that we don't typically see or understand."

Platz said he's even had conversations with his own children, both of whom attend Montour, about the needs that exist in all communities, whether those needs are visible or not.

"For example, my daughter had told me that nobody was homeless in the school district, and we had to have a long conversation about how that's not really a reality," he said.

The shopping day event was spearheaded by a committee of 21 students from both the high school and middle school. Student leaders from the National Honor Society, middle school student council and various other student-led organizations first began meeting in October to brainstorm ideas for the one fundraiser and three volunteer activities that they were tasked with organizing. Once they settled on organizing a clothing sale for their fundraiser,

they set up collection points at the elementary, middle and high schools. Students also utilized social media, posters and email outreach to spread the word.

High school students Ivy Freshwater and Mya Sorton both played key roles in bringing the shopping day event to fruition. Ivy says student leaders from each school worked together to plan the fundraiser and volunteer activities.

"I had people reach out to me and bring things to my house so that I could bring them," Ivy said. "We were collecting from every point."

The response from the community was overwhelming. The day of the event, students took over the cafeteria, spreading out clothing that they'd collected on nearly every available surface. Families in need were able to shop for free, while others scanned a QR code to donate money to support the United Way.

Through the initiative, students witnessed firsthand the direct impact of their efforts, as some families facing hardships were able to obtain essential clothing items.

"There was an email sent to me by a teacher specifically thanking us," Ivy said. "One family in our district recently lost their house to a fire, and they were able to come and get everything they needed ahead of time."

In addition to clothing donations, the event underscored the community's generosity. Many attendees donated more than the suggested \$5.

"It really surprised me how many people cared and wanted to help," Maya noted. "It showed us just how much people are willing to give."

The students' efforts extended beyond just collecting and distributing clothes. Any leftover clothing was donated to the United Way, which will distribute the clothing to those in need.

"It's nice to be able to give more than just money," Maya said. "It's good to have something physical that we can give...because all the other schools, we have to figure are going to be giving money. So it's nice to then also have another way to contribute..."

Student leaders from the high school and middle school organized a free clothing shopping day at the high school in February to benefit the United Way and lend assistance to community members.

