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Undies for Everyone: San Antonio's Jewish, Muslim communities unite to help Afghan refugee children

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New underwear sits on the desk as Jill Rips talks Thursday on the phone while working at the Center for Refugee Services. Agudas Achim Social Action Committee sponsored a community event called "Undies for Kids," where nearly 40 volunteers from the Jewish and Muslim communities packaged more than 2,000 pairs of underwear for Afghan refugee children who receive aid from the center.
William Luther, Staff / Staff

SAN ANTONIO — San Antonio's Jewish and Muslim communities are working together to provide underwear for Afghan refugee children served by the Center for Refugee Services.

A mitzvah is a good deed in the Jewish community, said Marcia Waldgeir, who co-chairs the National Council of Jewish Women-San Antonio's community outreach team with Ruthie Wurzburg. They partnered with Congregation Agudas Achim on the "worthwhile project."

"Participating in Undies for Everyone was a mitzvah," Waldgeir said. "It is heartbreaking to learn that in this country, children go to school without underwear. We are grateful we could help alleviate the problem in our community and hope this will be a yearly endeavor."

Nearly 40 volunteers gathered at 10 tables in the social hall at the Agudas Achim Synagogue on Huebner Road to work on the initiative created by Rabbi Amy Weiss, honored this year as a CNN Hero. In 2012, she began the nonprofit Undies for Everyone, which has provided more than 2 million pairs of underwear to kids across the nation.

Weiss drove from Houston to help the volunteers as they sorted and rolled 2,700 pairs of new underwear. Agudas Achim Sisterhood provided refreshments for the volunteers who packaged 360 bags of underwear within an hour and a half. Each bag contained seven pairs, one for each day of the week. They packed the colorful briefs, many dotted with cartoon characters and superheroes, into 10 boxes.

"This is an opportunity for communities to do a fun and easy volunteer project to help local kids who experience underwear insecurity," Weiss said.

The Agudas Achim Social Action Committee, led by social action chair Mike Ozer, started the local project. They partnered with the National Council of Jewish Women-San Antonio, which has focused on public service and Tikkun Olam or repair of the world.

Ozer said the congregation, under the leadership of Rabbi Steven Bayar, and the council raised \$1,500 to buy the underwear. He said the event was successful and meaningful because they mustered so many volunteers' help.

"All of the people had a fun time," Ozer said. "They were conversing with each other, getting the job done and feeling good about their contribution, so the kids could have underwear for the holidays and improve their dignity."

In addition to the council, volunteers included members of Temple Beth-El and the Muslim Children's Education and Civic Center.

"As a synagogue, we're interested in reaching out to the Muslim community," Ozer said.

Center staff member and volunteer Gety Siddiqui, 77, said it was good to know they were helping people in need.

"It's a very good feeling," Siddiqui said. "That's how it should be. We respect each other's religion and each other's culture. We work together."

Jill Rips oversees women and children's services at the Center for Refugee Services and drove a truck over to pick up the boxes. The center offers families job assistance, a food pantry, English as a second language classes, health and wellness support and youth activities.

"They'll be so thrilled to get this colorful, fun underwear," Rips said. "We really rely on the community for donations. We went from serving 1,000 active clients to 4,500 active clients. We've taken on new expenses since August 15 and the arrival of clients from Afghanistan."

The packages will be distributed at a holiday toy event at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 7420 Huebner Road, from Dec. 19 to Dec. 24. The center plans to invite 2,000 children. Rips said volunteers and toy donations are still needed. For more information, call Jean Sherrill at 210-445-6468 or email jeanasherrill80@gmail.com.

She said the center is grateful for the undergarments and donations from the group, including baby layettes, blankets, diapers and winter clothing.

"It was delightful that the Muslim and Jewish communities are coming together to address the need," Rips said. "This is how our beautiful mosaic of San Antonio should be working together."

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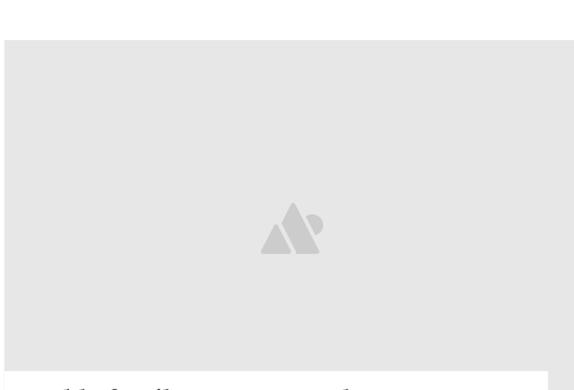
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