MARTHA WISE AWARD FOR AN EXISTING PROJECT 2016-2017

CHAPTER NAME: Junior Auxiliary of Columbus, Mississippi

CHAPTER ADDRESS: Shannon Stafford
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NAME OF PROJECT: Clothing (Welfare)

POPULATION CATEGORY: 15,000-29,999

ACTIVE MEMBERSHIP OF CHAPTER: 54

NUMBER OF MEMBERS PARTICIPATING: 54

TOTAL HOURS OF SERVICE GIVEN BY MEMBERS: 594

NUMBER OF CHILDREN SERVED: 341

AMOUNT OF MONEY SPENT: $41,000

Everyone feels better when they are wearing nice, clean, well-fitting clothes. We all perform better and are more confident when we are dressed appropriately. Children especially deserve to feel great in their school clothes. Junior Auxiliary of Columbus offers a project which provides clothing to children in our community who are in need. The clothing of children under the general welfare category is the oldest project in Junior Auxiliary of Columbus, having been in place since the organization was formed in the 1940s. Area school counselors, teachers and principals refer children who need assistance. JA members compile information on the families, interview the parent or guardian, and then determine if assistance is needed. Once a child has been found to be in need, a private clothing appointment is scheduled at The Hut for school clothing. The child receives a basic wardrobe consisting of shirts, pants, socks, undergarments, a coat and a belt. Many children of Lowndes County have been able to attend school feeling much more confident. During the 2016-2017
school year, Junior Auxiliary clothed approximately 340 children. Every active member of the chapter participates in Clothing and most JA members say it is their favorite project to work.

Many schools around the country have school uniforms. One of the biggest stated reasons for school uniforms is to try to eliminate the divide between the “haves” and the “have nots.” Simply put, if everyone is wearing the same thing, it is easier for those with less to blend in with those who have more. The trouble with that simplification is that those with less have a much harder time hiding when their clothing is worn out and needs to be replaced. Kids are not stupid. When someone shows up to school in a uniform that is way too small and worn so thin that there are holes in the pants those socioeconomic differences are as obvious as neon lighting. By taking referrals from school counselors and teachers, JA is able to help the truly needy and eliminate the risk of anyone taking advantage of the program. These neediest of children come to The Hut in all shapes, sizes and ages, which is why Clothing is the single largest ticket item on our annual budget. Time after time, appointment after appointment, children arrive at The Hut looking shy, embarrassed and often almost mute. Each member is trained in ways to ease this awkward discomfort and, inevitably, with each clothing item tried on and properly fit, the child blossoms before your eyes. Shyness gives way to pride. Embarrassment gives way to gratitude. Silence gives way to excited chattiness. The saying “the clothes make the man” is not just a cliché. Children feel better about themselves in brand new clothes. Their eyes brighten and their shoulders straighten. JA buys uniforms from the same clothing company that sells all around town so there is no way to tell from the outside whether a student’s clothes were supplied by JA or by their own families. In this way, the divide between those with and without is invisible.

While JA is providing a true blessing to these children, they are providing so much more to our members. It is not uncommon for tears to flow once a particularly needy family leaves The Hut. It is impossible to live in the bubble of the more
fortunate when you are confronted with abject poverty at each appointment. JA members are better community members in part because they know the depths of the need in our community. Not only are we more aware of the plight of the less fortunate, we are living out Christ’s calling to serve others each time we wrap a coat around the shoulders of a needy child.

Member Lindsay Clemons shared this story with membership at our last General Meeting:

“Over the weekend we decided to order pizza for dinner. I walked outside to meet the delivery guy and just happened to be wearing one of my JA t-shirts. A young man, who looked to be in his mid-twenties, gave me our food and as I was signing the bill he noticed my shirt. “Are you a member of JA?” I looked up and nodded and he grinned a brilliant smile. “Y’all gave me clothes when I was a kid.” He looked away for a second and when he looked back, his eyes were bright. “You do really good work. Thank you.” He got back into his car and left, and I had to stand outside for a minute to collect myself before going inside to my family.”

It is easy to overlook the impact one interaction can have on the life of a child. Clothing is arguably the most impactful project for JA of Columbus. We have been changing the lives of children in this way for over seventy years and will continue to do so for as long as we are able.