

Making a Difference: Group warms bodies, hearts



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Davari Hickman, 6, (center) tries on a new coat after being helped by Nkechi George-Winkler (center) while coats were given to students at Fairfield Court Elementary, Dec. 16, 2015. Beverly Davis (second from left) and others from the Continental Society of Richmond, gave over two dozen coats to students at the school as part of their "Gift of Warmth" program.

By MICHAEL PAUL WILLIAMS Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted 7 days ago

The children sitting on a colorful alphabet rug at Fairfield Court Elementary School gazed upward with expectant eyes as Nkechi George-Winkler began to speak.

“Today, we’re going to be sharing our Gift of Warmth program, where we’re going to give each one of you a brand-new coat,” said George-Winkler, president of the Richmond chapter of the Continentals Inc.

“So you get a coat, you get a coat, everybody’s getting a coat this morning. Is that exciting?”

“Yesssssss!” the kids shouted in unison, their enthusiasm undimmed by the unseasonably mild mid-December weather.

And then the Continentals, the local chapter of a national public service organization that seeks to enhance the welfare of underprivileged children, began rummaging through piles of brand-new winter coats. They didn’t stop until every child had been fitted with new outerwear.

Lloydajaih Newman, a fourth-grader, became the new owner of a purple coat — or “amethyst,” according to coat-maker Rothschild — that was a perfect match for her purple-framed eyeglasses and purple nail polish.

“It’s warm, and it’s better than the one I had,” she said.

Jordan Jackson looked sharp in his new black coat with teal and white trim. “It’s the right size, and it looks nice on me,” the fourth-grader said.

Tyree Barnhart, 8, appreciated the martial touch of his new coat, saying “I like camouflage, and I like lime green,” the color of the coat’s lining.

Dai’Jah Richardson, a tall fifth-grader wearing a safety patrol belt, was a challenge to fit because of her height. But the Continentals found a green coat for her.

In all, some 30 coats were handed out by George-Winkler, second vice president Beverly Davis, corresponding secretary Gwendolyn Drayton and a volunteer.

Several teachers helped with the distribution, along with assistant principal Ellena Ebanks. “Thank you on behalf of the Fairfield Court family for taking time to think of us and to care for our children as much as we do,” she told the ladies from Continental Societies.

“The program is very uplifting for the students, because this is a safe haven,” Davis said moments later. “And then we have wonderful volunteers who just reach out to our students.

“First of all, it teaches them about giving, and not just receiving, and that everyone shares and everyone cares about their well-being, both academically and socially, and every other way as the whole child.”

“Of course, some needs are greater than others, and we try to handle that also,” said Davis, noting that some children would not have warm winter coats without the program.

The chapter already had distributed coats at Richmond’s Stuart and Blackwell elementary schools, and the ladies were headed to George Mason Elementary after leaving Fairfield Court, a school in the public housing community on Richmond’s eastern edge.

Winter outerwear also would be given to Petersburg elementary students as part of a distribution of 200 coats overall.

“Most of the shopping was done by Nkechi,” Davis said. “She was there when they opened up at 8 o’clock in the morning.”

For George-Winkler, the purchasing began long before the holiday season as she canvassed for sales at Macy’s stores in central and eastern Virginia. “Short Pump, Southpark, Chesterfield Towne Center, the one in Norfolk. ... I went all the way to Hampton Roads, because we need that many coats.”

Actually, the need is greater than the chapter can fill. “Can you imagine how many more coats we need? We need a thousand coats,” Davis said.

The Richmond chapter, chartered in 1976, has 23 members. It is one of 48 Continental Societies in 20 states, the District of Columbia and Bermuda, with a total membership of about 900.

In the 1980s, the Richmond chapter began distributing navy blue sweaters to city schoolchildren. Toward the end of the decade, it switched to winter coats.

Two days after the coat giveaway at Fairfield Court, the chapter held its annual fundraiser, “Elegance in Black and White,” at the Richmond Marriott.

The fundraiser — along with donations from sponsors including the UPS Foundation and Bon Secours — subsidizes the chapter’s coat giveaway; \$10,000 a year in scholarships; an annual tour of historically black colleges and universities; and a Go Green Leadership Program, among other initiatives.

The Continental Societies members say their visits to the schools over the years to hand out coats have been rewarding and occasionally tear-producing. George-Winkler recalled a particularly emotional moment at Carver Elementary.

“There was a little boy who was a little larger than the others, and we did not have a coat to fit,” she recalled. “I said, ‘I will leave here and get you a coat, and I will be back before the end of the school day,’ and he started crying. And I said, ‘Why are you crying?’ He said, ‘Because people always promise me things.’”

“I drove down Broad Street to Burlington, and I got that coat and I rushed back to Carver School and, when I gave him the coat, he ran down the hall. ‘I got a coat!’ he exclaimed. ‘I got a coat!’”

“That’s the spirit of Christmas,” Davis said.

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