

YMCA's My Kids Closet helps families give their extras & get what they need

By Melissa Fili
MethuenLife Writer

Parents love watching their kids *grow!* But seeing kiddos quickly *outgrow* their clothes is problematic for families with limited finances.

A quartet of compassionate YMCA staffers has solved this issue by recently opening My Kids Closet at the Methuen Y at 129 Haverhill St. Parents can make an appointment to browse the donated shoes, coats, pants, tops and more. All items are free of charge and you do not need to be a YMCA member to take part.

My Kids Closet is a true labor of love for the women who created it: Director of Childcare Services (Lawrence branch) Mary Ellen King, Director of Early Childhood Education Caitlyn Haneffant and YMCA preschool teachers Heidi Gebhardt and Britney Lebel. They are all too aware of kids going to school without appropriate seasonal clothing or wearing items that just don't fit. They put together a plan for an in-house center where families could pick up used clothing in a respectful setting and where kids could select what they liked. Those families also have the chance to donate their own outdated items, continuing the cycle of helping other children in need.

"We really wanted to do this for our families," Britney said.



The Methuen YMCA's new My Kids Closet clothing exchange is now open in a bright, spacious and meticulously organized room there. Shown are co-founders and fellow Y staffers (from left) Caitlyn Haneffant, Mary Ellen King, Britney Lebel and Heidi Gebhardt with some available items.
MethuenLife photo by Melissa Fili

The four women planned, practiced and pitched their idea in a competitive "Shark Tank"-like environment (sponsored by the Merrimack Valley YMCA) and won a \$3,000 Innovate for Impact grant, allowing them to set up shop. They used the money to buy a washer and dryer, as well as bins to separate clothing by size, shelving and other supplies. Donations, ranging in size

from 2T to 14T, have been coming in and there is a group of "Laundry Fairies" who washes the clothes before they are put on the shelves.

A "soft opening" was held in February for 9 families. Double the number of families took part in March.

"We've met a great array of people," said Mary Ellen. "They tell us it's like a big,

GET INVOLVED!

TO DONATE: New or gently used, good-condition clothing, ranging in size from 2T-14T, is welcome. There is currently a need for girls clothing, size 2T-4T, and all sizes of summer wear. Please wash it before donating, if possible. To set up a time to donate, contact Caitlyn, chaneffant@mvyymca.org or (978) 683-5266 ext. 101.

TO SHOP: Call (978) 683-5266 to make an appointment. The Closet is open the second Saturday of the month from 9am-1pm. Due to COVID-19, each family is allowed a 15-minute visit and masks must be worn. Only 1 adult per group is allowed.

organized yard sale. ... It gives respect and dignity to every person who comes in. And it also gives them the opportunity to give back, by donating their items as well."

Heidi added that the name of this space reflects her group's desire to make kids feel good about the "new" items they're wearing: "Before, kids would ask me, 'Where did this come from?' and when I'd say, 'My kids' closet,' that was OK to them because it was just something that another kid couldn't use any longer. I knew that the name had to be My Kids Closet."

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