

# FROM THE EDITOR



## OPERATION SCHOOL BELL

Me and Jackie at the Operation School Bell event at the Kirkland Fred Meyer.

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My helper's name was Jackie. A mother, retired nurse, pediatrician's wife, and member of the Lake Washington School Board, Jackie had been at this multiday late-October event until nearly 9 p.m. the previous day and planned to be there at least as long on this evening. I'd been there 15 minutes and had known Jackie less than 15 seconds when I felt moved to ask her a simple question:

"Can I have a hug?"

Jackie obliged (thankfully!), and over the next couple hours I came to know some of her story, which I've briefly outlined above. We were at the Fred Meyer in Kirkland volunteering for Operation School Bell, an annual program conducted by the Assistance League of the Eastside.

Much of the Assistance League's work helping the homeless and victims of assault and domestic violence is done behind the scenes,

clothes. Since its inception in 1992, the program has bought school clothes for more than 39,000 students.

Having extensively researched and written about homelessness in our region, I knew this societal problem was buried beneath our wealthy sheen, but I'm not sure much of the general population is aware how deep the problem runs. It runs deep.

My time served with Operation School Bell amounted to around three hours, during which I received smiles, questions, and gratitude, and witnessed occasional embarrassment, usually on the face of some father who couldn't quite look me in the eye as I helped him tally his kid's purchases. It was as if he'd somehow failed his family by qualifying for the program. Ironic, because I viewed him as a success for having the courage to swallow pride and make sure his child was taken care of.

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but this event was high-profile, held less than a quarter mile away from rush-hour I-405. As businesspeople scrambled through the store's grocery section to pick up last-minute supper supplements, nearly 200 low-income students — accompanied by guardians and siblings — pushed shopping carts through Fred Meyer's clothing department in search of school clothes, pajamas, and shoes.

Those kids were part of the more than 3,200 students from the Lake Washington, Bellevue, and Northshore school districts who were able to shop for clothes this fall thanks to Operation School Bell — that's \$348,000 worth of

As the shoppers rushed from my station to their special checkout aisle, Jackie stayed by my side, and her smile stayed on her face. The whole time.

"It's all about the kids," she told me more than once. For me, it's also about the Jackies. Not just during the holiday season, but all year round.

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