

## **S.H.O.E.S.: Shoes Help Our Elementary Students**

Shoes serve the purpose of protecting our feet, but also in equipping us to be able move forward confidently. The famous quote speaks "to walking a mile in someone else's shoes" with a cautionary empathetic admonition that before you judge another person, try to understand their situation by placing yourself or a loved one in it. Sheena Walls and the storied organization she serves with, "In The Image", embraces this posture as they work diligently to meet their annual goal near the beginning of each school year in August to fulfil the shoe needs of Kent County Pre-K to 5th grade students with new athletic shoes and socks, among other things. With a 30-year track record of presence, support, and serving to meet the public's needs, they have made a definite positive impact and left an imprint upon the lives of these students and their families and community.

Walls first learned about the Neighborhood Match Fund program at the Grand Rapids Summit earlier this year. With the grant funds awarded, her team was able to purchase accurate shoe sizers to help give the youth shoes with a more accurate shoe fit instead of having used laminated paper ones to determine their shoe sizes, which often led to guesswork. These tools also greatly reduced time it took to serve the students and their families because the volunteers weren't left running back and forth, spending valuable time searching to find the right sizes.

Sheena and her team members anticipated an increase in the number of students that they served from 3,500 in 2022 to 4,000 this year and met that goal. This was made possible through the generosity of generous support of private donors along with other corporate and community sponsors of Meijer, Wolverine, Grand Rapids First, just to name a few. "This is a critical need that this shoe campaign meets to help relieve families' household budgets - especially when you have multiple school-aged children in the home. By providing the students with a brand new pair of shoes and socks of their choice, it also helped to reduce their stress, but also boost their confidence as well. The youth also have

the freedom to choose what they want and when they look good - they can feel good about themselves", explained Walls. "We are also in desperate need of hard-to-get athletic shoes youth sizes 5-7 and extra sizes 10-14 because we do not want to have to turn the youth away empty-handed.

As the organization continued to expand, so did its need for more space, solved by its current home on 4552 Kalamazoo Avenue SE. This is where Sheena Walls works with a dedicated team of eight people who help to make the magic happen. However, this is also another reason why they are in need of a great deal more volunteers to help them serve in their pop-up shops throughout the 49507 zip code in the Grand Rapids Community. These Pop-up Shop Events help the organization's staff and volunteers to bring the much-needed donations within the reach and locations of these underserved neighborhoods.

For those who may want to get involved, there are a number of ways for churches, businesses, social organizations, corporate employees, community groups to come serve, donate, or adopt "In The Image" nonprofit to support this tremendous undertaking. Also consider donating these essential resources as well for the youth and their families such as household goods, gently used clothes (especially men's), and personal hygiene products among other items directly to their "Free Store" (all things free of charge) that supports these families throughout the year too.