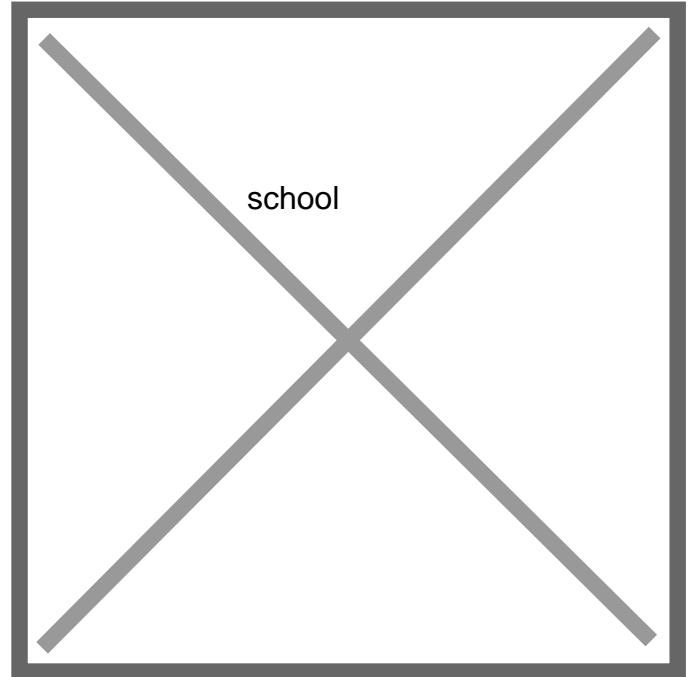


Clothing kids for school keeps Army relevant

CENTER FOR STUDENT MISSIONS ASSISTS BACK-TO-SCHOOL EFFORT



HILDA IBARRA and her 8-year-old son enjoy selecting back to school clothes at the Salvation Army Service Center in San Francisco, CA.

Teenage volunteers from San Jose, Calif., and Twin Falls, Idaho, helped distribute new back-to-school clothes to 1,800 children of low income families in San Francisco the weekend before school began. It was a new adventure for them an opportunity to stretch their understanding, break down a few stereotypes and face a few big city realities.

As participants in a weeklong Center for Student Missions program, the group of 32 bunked at the Salvation Army's 240 Turk Street facility in the middle of the Tenderloin district and were out on the streets of San Francisco by day. Ingenuous in their responses and obviously sincere in their desire to learn, they diced onions at the Haight Ashbury Soup Kitchen, Project Open Hand, the Rescue Mission and Martin De Porres, pulled weeds at a community day care facility and helped The Salvation Army with youth and senior programs.

Their youth work was at The Salvation Army Service Center where they helped distribute back-to-school clothes donated by Sears and Kids in Distressed Situations (KIDS). The project was based on a pattern that has become very successful for the Army. The organization literally turned its warehouse into "a store where no money changes hands." Volunteers especially teens served as personal shoppers, guiding young students and their parents through the racks to pick out what's most popular. The feeling was retail and extremely positive. Kids didn't feel as if they were getting a handout. Each one got personal attention.

“Using teens to help younger kids to shop gives this program a very special touch,” says Lt. Colonel Bettie Love, administrator of San Francisco programs. “They know what’s in style. They know what kids like.”

The teens were new to San Francisco and they saw immediate physical differences from their hometowns. An Idaho teen looked at a 40-story building and laughed that any building over four stories tall in his community was probably a hotel.

Twelve year old Marissa Morris from San Jose had only been to San Francisco once before, and then not on the seamier side of the city. Naturally shy, she admitted that she had been scared to sit down next to a scruffy homeless man in a soup kitchen and was somewhat daunted by the variety of San Francisco neighborhoods. At the back-to-school project she chose to work behind the scenes, restocking shelves with Alan Paunovich, building manager.

The Idaho group was the largest and some weren’t exactly from Twin Falls. “You might say we’re about half an hour out of town,” a pair of lanky teens confessed sheepishly. One community has 8,000 people. The other is in the neighborhood of 2,000. What else was different? “Well,” came another bemused answer, “one of our towns has a stoplight. The other doesn’t.”

After devotions at The Salvation Army in San Francisco, the teens were encouraged to write down what they had seen and felt about the homeless and the poverty level they had never known. “It’s sure a lot different being in church and praying about it and being right there where it’s happening,” said one youth. “You can actually sense it. Tasting, smelling...praying about it while you’re experiencing it makes it real.”

Part of the experience is learning to get around town on their own. A team on their way to Martin De Porres admitted to taking the right bus but going the wrong way. Another exercise, the Urban Plunge, asked participants to rely on their own resources as if they were homeless and looking for a place to stay. A chaperone said in his experience, “latch key kid” describes a child waiting for his parents to come home from work. On the street in San Francisco his perception is of children out on the street from early morning until 11:00 p.m. “By their language and gestures, you can see they’ve had to grow up quickly,” he noted. “Yet hey’re so excited about getting a new back pack for school!”

JUDY VAUGHN