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Shelburne Backpack Program to give kids in need a supportive boost as they return to school

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LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

As the back-to-school season approaches, the Shelburne Rotary Club is once again working with the Shelburne Food Bank to make sure local children have the supplies they need to start the school year on equal footing.

The Backpack Program has been operating for about seven years after the food bank identified a need for assistance with school supplies.

Rotarian Bobbi Ferguson said that the program equips students in need with the essentials.

?We really look after the basics,? she said. ?Every kid gets the essential items for the start of the school year through the program. That's a backpack, a lunch kit and a water bottle. The food bank makes sure that they have food to carry in said backpacks.?

The partnership divides responsibilities between the two organizations. The food bank registers students and families throughout July and August, providing the local Rotary Club with weekly numbers and the ages of participating children. Rotary then purchases the supplies needed for the students.

When extra funding allows, the program also adds school supplies such as pencils, pens, crayons and pencil crayons. Community partners and individual donors also contribute supplies, including handmade pencil cases.

Ferguson said that the program started much smaller several years ago, but as knowledge and need spread, that has changed dramatically over time.

?The program has been in existence for about six years now,? she said, ?At the start, we had maybe 50 students. Last year, we were up to over 200 students.?

This has greatly multiplied the price of the program, which cost approximately $12,000 last year, with the cost of quality backpacks, lunch kits and water bottles adding up quickly.

Organizers emphasize that the program is designed to protect students' dignity and won't compromise on cheap substitute products.

?You want to be able to get a decent backpack that's going to last,? Ferguson said. ?You want the zippers to last all year. So the backpacks range from $40 to $50. A decent, insulated lunch kit is $20 to $25, and the cheapest water bottle that's still good is around $10. When you put that all together, it adds up.?

Children and families can choose backpacks appropriate for their age, rather than receiving identical items that could distinguish them from their classmates. The goal is to ensure students return to school with the same basic tools as their peers.

The program continues to rely heavily on community support. Important partners like the Tim Hortons Smile Cookie campaign contribute funds in support of the backpack program.

Monetary donations are particularly valuable because they allow organizers to purchase exactly what is needed, while donations of basic school supplies are also welcomed.

Contributions can be made through the beginning of the school year, with extra backpacks kept available for families who need assistance later, as the need does not disappear once classes begin.

The backpack program is set to continue being an important lifeline for families well into the 2026-2027 school year. For more information, call 519-278-4578.