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25 Years of Backpacks for Kids: A Community Tradition Built on Caring

What started as a simple idea to help local families 25 years ago has grown into something much larger than anyone could have imagined. Today, Backpacks for Kids is more than a school supply drive. It is a countywide tradition, a community partnership, and a reminder of what can happen when people come together to support children.

For 25 years, Livingston County residents, businesses, schools, volunteers, and organizations have worked side by side to ensure that local students begin the school year with the tools they need to succeed. Along the way, the program has provided thousands of backpacks and school supplies, touched countless families, and become a symbol of the generosity that defines this community.

A Simple Idea Sparks Something Bigger

The story of Backpacks for Kids began in 2002 when Jan Morgan, a receptionist and switchboard operator at Livingston Educational Service Agency (LESA), took three of her grandchildren shopping for school supplies.

When she reached the checkout counter, the total came to nearly \$150.

The experience left a lasting impression.

If purchasing supplies for her own grandchildren was that expensive, Morgan wondered how families already struggling to make ends meet could possibly afford everything their children needed for school.

Rather than simply recognizing the problem, she decided to do something about it.

Morgan proposed the idea of collecting donated school supplies for local families in need. She shared the concept with then-LESA Superintendent Sally Vaughn, who immediately supported the effort and encouraged staff members to form a committee.

Soon, others stepped forward to help lead the initiative, including Jean Garratt, LESA's Director of Head Start Programming, and Judy Paulsen, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent, who remains heavily involved with the program today.

The effort was originally called “**School Supplies for a Successful Start,**” but its mission was clear from the beginning: provide school supplies and backpacks to children and youth so they could begin the school year equipped for learning.

Meeting a Need That Continues Today

The beginning of a school year brings excitement, but it can also bring stress.

For families living on fixed incomes, experiencing job loss, facing unexpected hardships, or simply trying to stretch a household budget, purchasing school supplies can become an overwhelming expense.

In 2003, the National Retail Federation estimated that households spent nearly \$500 on back-to-school supplies. By 2025, that figure had climbed to more than \$850 per student.

The need that Morgan recognized more than two decades ago has only grown.

As Morgan noted years ago, “There is great need in Livingston County. Most people think of Livingston County as affluent, but it’s not all affluent.”

The county’s reputation often masks the reality that many local families struggle to meet basic needs.

“I’ve had the opportunity to be on-site for our backpack giveaways, and the gratitude our families show is truly heartfelt,” said Merribeth Tognetti, LESA’s Education Center Receptionist. “Growing up in a family of three kids, I saw firsthand how tight the back-to-school season could be, and a program like this would have helped ease that financial strain for my parents.”

Backpacks for Kids exists to help bridge that gap and ensure students can start the school year feeling prepared and confident.

As former LESA Director of General Education Jim Reese explained, “We don’t want people to have to choose between back-to-school clothes and shoes and school supplies. I know sometimes, showing up to school that first day with a backpack full of supplies can make a huge difference for kids.”

A Community That Always Shows Up

From the beginning, the success of Backpacks for Kids has depended on the generosity of the community.

Over the years, donations have come from every corner of Livingston County. Businesses have contributed funds and supplies. Community organizations have organized collection drives. Schools have helped distribute backpacks. Volunteers have spent countless hours sorting, packing, and preparing materials.

Yet some of the most meaningful support has come from ordinary community members.

Parents, grandparents, neighbors, and even former recipients of the program have consistently stepped forward to help future generations of students.

“This marks my fifth summer with the agency and the Backpacks for Kids drive,” Tognetti said. “Every year I am blown away by the generosity of our community. Parents and grandparents of past LESA learners, local businesses, churches—so many people come together to make a difference. The support is truly inspiring.”

One memorable example came from Crystal Cubr, owner of Dan’s Doughnuts, and her husband John. Wanting to support the drive, Cubr is quoted saying, “The only thing I have to give is doughnuts.”

That simple idea turned into a successful backpack collection campaign. For every community member who donated a backpack, Dan’s Doughnuts provided a dozen doughnuts. Nearly 100 backpacks were collected through the effort alone.

Other years brought friendly competition. Local businesses challenged one another to see who could donate the most backpacks. At one point, Brighton and Hamburg Townships even competed to determine which community could contribute the most supplies.

Time and time again, Livingston County residents proved the truth behind a quote written in one of the early features of the program:

“One of the many good reasons why it’s great to live in Livingston County is the fact that there are so many people who practically celebrate at the opportunity to do good deeds for others.”

Twenty-five years later, that same spirit continues to define the program.

“This project continues to thrive because of the incredible generosity of our local community,” said Robin Schutz, LESA Great Start Collaborative Coordinator. “Whether it’s a business collection donations or neighbors quietly stepping up year after year, every backpack filled represents support, encouragement, and opportunity for a student in Livingston County.”

Rising to Every Challenge

The history of Backpacks for Kids is filled with examples of a community responding when the need was greatest.

In 2006, organizers realized they had collected enough school supplies but were falling dangerously short on backpacks—the most expensive and essential item needed for distribution.

Just days before the event, the committee issues a public call for help.

The community responded immediately.

Residents donated enough backpacks to meet the need and ensure every child received one.

Stories like that have repeated themselves throughout the program's history. Whenever a challenge emerged, people found a way to help.

When volunteers retired, others stepped forward.

When economic conditions became difficult, donations still arrived.

When people could not afford to contribute supplies or money, they donated their time.

The community's commitment has remained constant.

Growing Beyond Backpacks

As the program expanded, so did its impact.

What began with approximately 300 backpacks has grown to serve more than 1,800 students during peak years.

The annual effort now includes events such as Stuff the Bus, where a school bus is parked at Walmart and shoppers are encouraged to donate supplies as they shop, an annual charity golf outing organized in partnership with GM, and district-based backpack distribution events that allow students and families to receive supplies close to home.

The backpacks themselves have evolved as well.

Today, they include folders filled with valuable community resources designed to connect families with services and support available throughout Livingston County.

Thanks to the generosity of the community, many students have traded one worry for another. Instead of wondering whether they'll have a backpack at all, they get to decide which backpack best reflects their personality, from favorite colors to beloved characters and designs.

That choice may seem simple, but it helps children begin the school year feeling confident, included, and ready to learn.

As Morgan once said, “We want children to come to school with new supplies just like their peers and have a wonderful start to learning in the new school year.”

Adapting Through Unprecedented Times

Even a global pandemic could not spot Backpacks for Kids.

In 2020, when much of the world was shut down and traditional events were impossible, organizers found a new way forward.

The annual distribution was transformed into a drive-through event, allowing families to receive supplies safely from their vehicles while still connecting with school personnel and volunteers.

The format worked so well that it has continued in the years since, providing families with a convenient and welcoming experience while maintaining the personal connection that has always been central to the program.

Partnerships That Strengthen the Mission

The continued growth of Backpacks for Kids has also been fueled by strong partnerships.

For the past five years, General Motors and the Professional Managers Network have supported the program through an annual golf outing that raises funds for backpacks and school supplies.

Their involvement extends beyond fundraising. Volunteers participate in packing events, assist during the United Way Day of Caring, and help prepare backpacks for distribution.

These partnerships have enabled the program to expand its reach while maintaining the community-centered spirit that has defined it since the beginning.

More Than a Program

Backpacks for Kids has been featured over the years in publications and media outlets including USA Today, The Livingston Daily Press & Argus, The Ann Arbor News, The Detroit News, CBS Detroit, The Livingston Post, and others.

Yet, the program’s greatest achievement cannot be measured by headlines, backpack counts, or years of operation.

Its success can be found in the relief felt by parents who know one less expense is standing in the way of their child’s success.

And it can be found in the thousands of acts of kindness that have sustained the effort for a quarter century.

As one publication noted, “Every resident who dropped off a couple dollars or filled a dozen backpacks full of supplies should be proud of themselves for giving those hundreds of students a chance for a successful start.”

Looking Ahead

Throughout 25 years of service, one truth has remained constant: Backpacks for Kids has never been about a single person, organization, or event.

It began when Jan Morgan noticed a need and chose to act.

But the story did not end with her.

It continued because community members answered calls for help. Because volunteers gave their time. Because businesses offered resources. Because educators believed every child deserves an equal start.

“Efforts like this provide children with evidence of the support and care from others in the community,” wrote one news article.

Twenty-five years later, those words remain as meaningful as ever.

For Judy Paulsen, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent, who has helped lead Backpacks for kids for much of its history, the mission that inspired the program 25 years ago is the same one that continues to bring the community together today.

“This year marks 25 years of helping families in our community, and every backpack still represents a child beginning the school year with confidence and hope,” Paulsen said. “Over the years, I’ve seen our community come together time and time again to make that possible. As long as there are students who need a helping hand, we’ll remain committed to giving them the opportunity to succeed.”

Backpacks for Kids stands as a testament to what can happen when people choose to care for one another. It is a reminder that a single act of kindness can grow into a lasting tradition, and that when a community comes together, it can create opportunities that change lives.

As Backpacks for Kids celebrates its 25th year, the program remains a powerful example of Livingston County at its best: neighbors helping neighbors, families supporting families, and an entire community working together to ensure every child has the opportunity for a successful start.

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