

Ken-Ton BOE president Jill O'Malley invents 'Closet' to address local poverty

By Pauline Liu
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

When Rose Izard of Western New York needed warm coats for her four children this winter, she skipped the malls and headed for the Ken-Ton Closet, a volunteer-run, nonprofit facility that operates out of former school building in the Kenmore-Tonawanda Central School District.

The former stay-at-home mom had just started a job as a school cafeteria worker, and she liked the price of the goods in the Ken-Ton Closet: free.

"It's clothing that kids would feel comfortable wearing," Izard said, noting the clothing is always appropriate for school and on

trend. "It's a great place and I've told my neighbors, because it would be nice to see more people go there."

The Closet, as it's often called, has served children living in the Ken-Ton school district since 2013 by providing them with items of daily living such as clothing, school supplies, toiletries and other materials at no cost.

The 501(c)(3) organization is the brainchild of school board President Jill O'Malley, who serves as executive director of the nonprofit corporation that operates The Closet. She is also a full-time professor of biology at Eric Community College and the mother of three children, ages 8 to 12. In addition, she

serves as associate director of the Erie County Association of School Boards.



O'Malley



Employees of United Healthcare in Tonawanda raised money for the Ken-Ton Closet. But the best part, according to Closet staff, was a surprise corporate match of more than \$1,000.

Ken-Ton, whose graduates include CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer, had more than 20,000 students in the 1960s but has shrunk to 6,650 amid regional industrial decline. The district closed 16 school buildings in the 1970s and 1980s, and three more as part of a consolidation in 2016.

Today, about 45% of the district's students are receiving free or reduced lunch. Two percent of the district's students are homeless, 3% are English language learners and 77% are white, according to State Education Department data.

O'Malley told *On Board* that she got the idea for the Closet because she wanted to do something about the economic disparity in Ken-Ton.

She remembers the day the divide between haves and have-nots in her community became stark in her mind. She overheard a little girl tell her mother that her Ugg boots needed to be dry cleaned. Then, she met a school nurse who kept a spool of rope for students to use to hold their pants up. "This happened in the same school district, on the same day!" O'Malley said.

The first location of the Closet was O'Malley's home. She had the support her husband, Matt, who teaches special education at Kenmore West High School and is a member of the Closet's board of directors.

As a school board member, O'Malley said she views addressing poverty as essential to fostering higher student achievement.

"Growing up in poverty myself, I recognize that there is an undercurrent of constant stress for our students," she said. "That serves as a distraction from other things that are important like academics. We can't expect our students to learn if they are hungry or if they have

clothing that is dirty or doesn't fit."

"As a school community, we need to embrace this reality and band together to address these issues," she said. "I want to level the playing field for our socioeconomically disadvantaged students."

"I give Jill a lot of credit," Superintendent Stephen Bovino said. "Having the Closet supply clothes and school supplies eases some of the stress that these families face trying to live their daily lives and have their children prepared for school."

When the inventory outgrew the O'Malleys' home, the program moved to three rooms in a town-owned facility. This past summer, the Closet moved again to a larger leased space, on the second floor of a district-owned building, the former Jefferson School.

So that people can "shop with dignity," volunteers have decorated the latest home of the Closet to make it look like a boutique, according to Assistant Director Cathy McLeod. She especially likes it when parents show up with their children, because "the younger kids think they're just shopping since it looks like a store."

Patrons are referred to as "customers" or "shoppers."

"Don't call them, 'clients,'" said McLeod, who sits on the Closet's board of directors. "The whole goal is we want to send kids to go to school feeling they belong... When they feel accepted, they do better in school because it's one less distraction for them."

The Closet currently serves 800 children, newborns to age 18, from 157 families in the district. Families are required to register and provide photo ID in order to participate.

It is open two days per week and run by more than 20 volunteers, in-

cluding retirees, students, teachers and parents. Families can come in every other month to receive toiletries, pick out three or four outfits, shoes, new socks/underwear and specialty items including a winter coat and holiday clothing. Last winter, volunteers gave away a record 450 winter coats.

New items are either donated or purchased through fundraising. Donated clothing can be dropped off at nine collection sites, mostly in municipal buildings.

To help pay for new socks, underwear, school supplies, back packs and other items, the Closet holds fundraisers including an annual meat raffle (see story, below). The nonprofit's annual budget of more than \$30,000 also includes grants and donations.

The Closet has been so successful that it has "spawned mini closets" in two district buildings at Kenmore West High School and Franklin Middle School.

Representatives from neighboring

school districts, including the Maryvale, Depew and Grand Island school districts, have stopped in for tours to see if they can create similar programs.

McLeod recommends starting out small. "After all, it took Ken-Ton Closet seven years to get to where it is now," she said.

McLeod is a retired special education teacher. She began volunteering at the Closet because she missed working with kids. It also offered her a way to give back to the community. She soon

learned that volunteers benefit from the experience as much as the customers do.

"For the volunteers, it's a passion, not a hobby and they feel very strongly about what they do," McLeod said. "I can't tell you how many times we've all left here in tears because of the stories people have told us."

For more information about the Ken-Ton Closet or donate, go to <https://www.kentoncloset.org/>.

How is your district dealing with poverty? Tell us at editor@nyssba.org.

Meat raffle, partnerships key to success of Ken-Ton Closet

By Pauline Liu
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

One of the largest annual fundraisers for the Ken-Ton Closet, a charity with close ties to the Kenmore-Tonawanda school district, is the annual Meat Raffle.

That's right, a "meat raffle." They are popular in western New York as well as Minnesota, Western Canada,

Australia and Great Britain.

At the Ken-Ton Closet Meat Raffle, participants typically pay \$10 for an admission ticket or \$80 for a table with seating for 10. They're encouraged to bring their own food. Beer and water are available at no charge, which is why participants must be over 21. Each round generally costs \$1 to participate.

With some luck, you could win two lbs. of bacon or 3 lbs. of hot dogs

from local butchers. Those interested in rounds featuring more expensive cuts of meat, such as two 12 oz. T-Bone steaks or a pack of country ribs, have to shell out \$2 per ticket.

There are about 11 rounds for the evening. For each round, there are three separate raffle drawings resulting in three separate prizes, 33 drawings in all.

The Closet's 2019 meat raffle was held in March at St. Andrew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda. According to Closet Executive Director Jill O'Malley, the event generally draws 300 to 400 people and raises about \$10,000. That's one-third of the Closet's annual budget, making it one of the nonprofit's leading fundraisers.

Local entrepreneur Paul Billoni said the Closet is one of the most organized activist groups that he's ever worked with.

"The individuals involved are very focused and have a clear mission and are very good at what they do supplying those in need with clothing and other essentials," he said.

Billoni is an important partner of the Closet. He owns Colvin Cleaners in Kenmore, which has run a Coats for Kids drive for 24 years. Last year, he collected a record 18,500 coats for needy children throughout western New York.

One of the places his coats end up is the Ken-Ton Closet.

"Our mission is to help ensure that every family in western New York has a warm coat, and the Ken-Ton Closet helps us achieve our mission," Billoni told *On Board*. "We let them cherry pick our coats. We'll dry clean or launder them, then drive them over to their facility and hang them on racks."

A local Boys Scout troop was another partner. During the Closet's first three years, the Closet used large plastic garbage bins to accept clothing donations. Unsurprisingly, the bins were sometimes mistaken for trash receptacles. In 2016, those plastic bins



This t-shirt ordered by the Ken-Ton Closet to memorialize its 2019 Meat Raffle was sold out.

were replaced with wooden ones built as an Eagle Scout project by Boys Scouts of America Troop 104.

According to Executive Director O'Malley, the Closet is expected to serve 1,000 children by the end of the year.

But O'Malley, whose other hats include being school board president, isn't satisfied; she points out that 1,000 isn't even 15 percent of the district's students-in-need.

She is pinning her hopes for growth on a new partnership and some that are yet to be formed. For instance, the nonprofit has begun working with local police to create programs to identify and assist high-risk youth.

She hopes some other new programs can be developed to address some of the social, emotional and physical wellness needs of students in the next few years.

With support from the community and volunteers, she believes much more can be achieved. "We owe the success of the Closet to those that pour their love into helping kids they have never even met," O'Malley said.



For its first three years, the Ken-Ton Closet used garbage bins to collect donated clothing. In 2016, a local Boy Scout troop replaced those with wooden bins (inset). Leaning on the bin is Joseph Pritchard, now in seventh grade.

Photos courtesy of the Ken-Ton Closet