

## LOCAL NEWS

## Helping Vallejo kids is a 'shoe-in'

Approximately 250 pairs given out at Faith Food Fridays



Paul Cheatham tries shoes on Carlitos Garcia, 3, as part of Project KIKS at Faith Food Friday in Vallejo. (Chris Riley—Times-Herald)

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On Friday morning Faith Food Fridays and Project KIKS weren't just putting leather to feet, but smiles to kids faces.

Approximately 250 shoes were expected to be given out free to youngsters at the inaugural event that Mary Ann Buggs is hoping happens more and more in the future due to the days success.

"I'm calling it a first-annual event because I want this to happen every year now," said Buggs, an administrative director with Faith Food Fridays. "It's gratifying to do something with helping people besides free food. It makes me want to serve Vallejo even more.

"There was one 4-year-old who came in today and she was jumping up and down when seeing she was going to get new shoes," Buggs continued, trying to fight back a few tears. "Usually we hand people free food, but for this event the kids and their parents were allowed to come to the back of the facility and choose their shoes. The kids kept saying, 'Oh, we get to pick them ourselves?!' That was one of my favorite parts."

Paul Cheatham, the founder of Project KIKS (Kind Initiative Kids Shoes) was also thrilled to be helping out and was in a joyful mood when sizing kids up for their free shoes.

"Getting new shoes is golden," Cheatham said. "We're having so many families come and we have to be happy to help them out. We won't be sad. We're providing shoes for them and mediating a tough spot for them.

"One child, who was about 6 or 7, came in here today wearing their mother's shoes," Cheatham continued. "My heart just goes out to that kid. I saw him come in, I found a shoe and just said, 'This is the one.' He was all happy after that and that makes the mom happy. We want to put a lot of smiles on faces."



People look for shoes for kids during Project KIKS at Faith Food Friday in Vallejo. (Chris Riley—Times-Herald)

There was a ton of smiles on the faces of the Goins' family, as Elijah, 3, sat on a chair and waited for Cheatham to find the correct fit for him. Elijah was happy with a pair of white shoes that fit perfectly, but seemed to be even more excited for a future pair of blue tennis shoes that he might be able to wear in about a year. His sisters, Emmily, 10, and Angel, 8, were also thrilled to walk away with new footwear.

"I like my shoes a lot because they are pink shoes, just like my mom's shoes," Angel said. "I saw them and thought they were really cute and my favorite color. I have a pink bed at home and these shoes will match with it."

"I like the color of my shoes and that they're comfortable," Emmily said. "I can't wait to play around in them."

Faith Food Fridays and Project KIKS weren't the only ones involved in the event as Cheatham cited Solano Community Foundation, Immersive Learning Center, Solano AIDS Coalition, Solano County Supervisor Erin Hannigan, First Five Solano and others as being big factors in helping out. Buggs also said a large donation was made by Lisa Gutierrez-Wilson of the Vallejo PEACE Project.

"She donated over 100 shoes herself," Buggs said. "We've had help from all over the community but she really got it done. She knows a lot of people in the city that have a heart to help."

Jeni Olsen, who is the founder of Teens Connect and a board member in Napa, was also at the event on Friday and excited to help out. Olsen just came back from Baja, Mexico, where she and a few volunteers helped give out a few hundred shoes to farmworkers. In 2020 alone she helped distribute 885 shoes to low-income housing around Vallejo.

"It's an incredible feeling to give out all these brand new shoes," Olsen said. "I'm happy to represent all these organizations and be the one to help give all these kids their shoes."

Project KIKS was started by Cheatham while he was living in the Yountville retirement home for veterans. He's been working in Vallejo for over a decade now as the organization has grown to the point where it is helping people not just locally, but around the world. Currently there are missions to give out shoes in the United States, Liberia, Mexico, Ghana and South Africa.

Sekou Sekou Dukuly, the Vice President of PROJECT KIKS, just came back from Arizona where he helped give out 20,000 shoes to low income families.

"I'm grateful to be part of that and to help communities," Dukuly said. "I'm also glad to come here today and see how well we're doing. It's great getting a new pair of shoes. Who wouldn't feel good? If you (points at this reporter) got a new pair of tennis shoes, wouldn't you feel great?"