

Beth's Closet adds to Hope Chest

By THOMAS MICHALSKI

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PINELLAS COUNTY – Lawyers from the 6th Judicial Circuit Guardian ad Litem Program of the Pinellas County Public Defender's Office and others have devised a unique way to help troubled children. They provide clothing for appearance sake that also boosts their self-esteem. The concept of distributing clothing to the needy is not new, but the Beth's Closet extension in the public defender's office called Hope Chest has sparked plenty of assistance from criminal justice personnel.

Hope Chest is the idea of Kay Dillinger, wife of Public Defender Bob Dillinger. The project is named after their late daughter, a 2006 suicide victim whose death devastated the family. Originally launched at the PACE Center for Girls in Pinellas Park, an organization for troubled teens, Dillinger opened the annex at the Pinellas County Criminal Justice Center at 14250 49th St. in Clearwater just six weeks ago.

"The project is named after Beth as our way of remembering her," Dillinger said.

The Hope Chest offers nearly new and brand new clothing and accessories, much of it donated by Macy's of Tyrone Square Mall in St. Petersburg. "Many children never owned new clothing," Dillinger said. "They or their families had no money for shopping. Many youngsters are removed from homes due to neglect, abuse or abandonment and into the criminal justice system with little more than the clothes on their backs.

Elyse McGuire of the ad Litem Program said a grateful smile on a child's face is worth all the work to make the program a success. Some girls clutch donated items to their chest with tears in their eyes. "They are not used to getting new clothing," McGuire said, who along with fellow attorney Melissa Jagger work in the ad Litem Program.

The project also helps teenagers keep their court dates. Those are the youngsters in the dependency program who wind up in trouble with the law. "Word gets out that they can get free clothing and other assistance," McGuire said. "That acts as an incentive to help them get to court. Some even get clothing for job interviews."

Patrice Moore, an assistant public defender who represents teenagers under the crossover program, said children as young as 11 often face abuse or neglect. They suffer from post traumatic stress and need counseling. Offering them new clothing helps to improve their self-esteem. "They see that someone really cares," Moore said. "That means a lot to them."

Stephen J. Nelson, another assistant public defender, echoed Moore's sentiments. But it's not only lawyers who pitch in. So do office staffers like Kim Rogers and Barbara Baetz who also donate their own time and money to the project. "One 14-year-old girl asked if she could hug me," Baetz said. "It was the first time anyone did something nice for her."

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