

20 years later, Kevin Buckel still helping put uniforms on needy New Orleans students

As I reflect on almost 25 years of writing for The Times-Picayune, I think about the people who have touched me, made me think, changed me. One of them is Kevin Buckel. I met him in 1991, a year after I started writing a column for the Metro page. When he told me what he was planning to do, I thought it was a crazy idea, but I was impressed by his sincerity and interested in what would happen.



Courtesy of Adopt-A-Family Kevin Buckel's Adopt-

A-Family uniform program helps hundreds of New Orleans families each year.

Buckel had decided to celebrate his 29th birthday by spending three days and two nights living as a homeless person. He was manager of Le Meridien Sports Center and was donating trial membership fees that month to Covenant House, which serves homeless teenagers. When he had worked at the New Orleans Athletic Club on Rampart Street, he'd seen street kids looking sad and lost, and he wanted to get an inkling of what it felt like to live on the street.

"I think, God, what must it be like for a homeless child?" he said.

His experience was sobering. He hung out with drunks and homeless teenagers and slept on the cold concrete. He discovered that pedestrians would look away from him or through him, and he was asked by savvy kids if he was a cop. Even unshaven and unkempt, he didn't look homeless. He lacked a desperate look in his eyes.

After those three days, he never saw homeless people the same way again. In 1992, he dreamed up his nonprofit **Adopt-A-Family program**, a way for groups with something to give to help families living on the edge. He asked schools, civic groups and church groups to collect household goods for people who'd lost their belongings in a fire or are moving out of a shelter into an apartment. It helped families dealing with a crisis, and it still does.

His **Adopt-A-Family Uniform Drive grew out of his program**. When he was getting Adopt-A-Family going, New Orleans public schools were adding uniforms, and parents would tell him uniforms for their kids were what they needed most.

He figured out a plan that has been outfitting the city's neediest children for the past 20 years, and every penny he raises goes toward school uniforms.

It works like this: People send contributions in any amount, and school social workers identify students and use \$50 vouchers to buy two complete uniforms for them. Everyone who supports the program gets a thank-you note and a receipt for the uniform purchase.

Buckel, who moved to Long Beach, Miss., years ago, just keeps plugging along. He pays postage costs and does the work on one end, the social workers do it on the other end, and lawyers at Cabibi & Caibibi in Metairie volunteer their services to make sure all the money donated is accounted for. Each student who receives a uniform writes a thank-you note. Some add crayon drawings that show their smiling faces.

More students in need

I got my annual phone call from Buckel at the beginning of August.

"The need just keeps going up," he said. "After Katrina, I've raised \$4,000 to \$6,000 more every year, but the lists of students keep getting longer."

The most surprising thing, he said, was how many of the students are considered to be homeless.

When I talked to Carroll Bernard, the social worker at SciTech Academy, she said around 15 students at her school have been identified as homeless.

"Parents have to fill out a residency form, and that's how we find which students are living in shelters," she said. "And some of our kids' residency is up in the air. They're just bouncing around from one family member to another."

Bernard, who has worked with Buckel for the past three years, said the program has been a tremendous help.

"It's been wonderful. I submit the names and he gets back to me right away," she said. "I almost count on it now for our homeless population."

Annie Bachrach, site coordinator and social worker at Batiste Cultural Arts Academy at Live Oak, told me that her school reported 44 students as homeless at the end of the last school year.

"A few families move from home to home. They stay with friends. A lot of the kids aren't living with their mothers," she said.

She has students who have just one uniform or part of one, and it's from last year.

"We've had to teach kids how to wash their shirts at home. One boy, we had to get detergent for him so he could wash his one shirt."

When students get two new shirts and two new skirts or pairs of pants through the uniform drive, they're very grateful.

"They feel more accepted," she said. "They have a sense of belonging and a sense of school pride."

Carrie Wilson, the social worker at McDonogh City Park Academy, called to tell me how much the Adopt-A-Family program has meant to her. She used to work at the New Orleans Women's Shelter, and she got to know Buckel then.

"He's been heaven-sent, not just for the school but for the shelter," she said.

The uniforms are a godsend for her students.

"Pretty much, they're overjoyed," she said. "It overwhelms them. They think, 'Somebody does care about me.'"

A call for volunteers

When I talked to Buckel earlier this week, he said that because he is getting so many requests right now, he's looking for a volunteer -- someone who has access to a copy machine and a postage meter -- to help him with the paperwork a couple of hours a week for the next few weeks.

"I'm trying to be a little more directly involved, so I can get the uniforms to the students as quickly as possible," he said.

I told him I'd been thinking about that 29-year-old guy hanging out on Rampart Street in 1991 and how his experience led to helping New Orleans schoolchildren for the past 20 years.

"Being the 20th year, I want to dedicate it to my son and his beautiful wife, Chantal," he said.

When he started Adopt-A-Family, Buckel told me his little boy was his inspiration. He wanted to show him that his dad could do something to make a better world. Now Chad Buckel is 29. He has served three tours in the Middle East. He's a captain in the Marine Corps. And on July 21, he got married at St. Mary's Church in New Orleans.

"I'm just so proud of Chad and what he's accomplished," Buckel said.

And he is forever thankful for the people who support him.

"They deserve all the credit," he said. "They trust me with their money, and it's a responsibility I take seriously."

Often, donors enclose notes with their checks.

"Their notes and the thank-you notes from the kids make it all come together," he said. "That's what keeps me going year after year."

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Checks in any amount should be made out to Adopt-A-Family and sent to Adopt-A-Family Uniform Drive, P.O. Box 457, Long Beach, MS 39560. Find out more at [la-](#)

adoptafamily.com. Contact Buckel at **adoptafamily@cableone.net** if you'd like to help him with the paperwork involved in the program.

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