

Deseret News

Apple Tree aims to outfit Utah homeless families

Residents of Road Home measured for shoes, school clothes

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Deseret News

Published: Thursday, July 1, 2010 1:06 a.m. MDT

SALT LAKE CITY— Mercedes Felarise stands calmly amid the din of activity scurrying all about, her baby balanced on her hip and two more of her seven children close by.

Now 41, she could pass for half her age. When she was in her 20s, she never could have imagined she'd be having her children measured for new clothes and shoes at the Road Home, where she is living temporarily with her family after threats of domestic violence led her to Utah from Florida.

As member of the LDS Church, they were planning the move before the threats began, but fled early when tensions escalated after her husband was ordered to pay child support. In her hand, she clutches a list of sizes for her children, ages 18, 16, 14, 9, 7, 3 and 9 months.

Personnel from Educators Mutual Insurance have come to Salt Lake's homeless shelter to head up the sixth annual Apple Tree program, which allows local residents to help purchase new clothes, shoes, school supplies and backpacks for the children who live there.

Marilyn Holmquist, executive administrative assistant with Educators Mutual, said once the children are measured and shoe sizes determined, the information will go on apple-shaped tags that will hang on trees at area Payless, Staples and DownEast Outfitters locations.

Much like the annual Angel Tree program at Christmas time, shoppers are encouraged to choose an apple, which includes a photo of the child and an item he or she will need to go back to school. They purchase the item, which is then returned by the retailer to the homeless shelter for distribution to the right child.

"It's a summertime Christmas" for both the children and employees at Educators Mutual, Holmquist said. "When we bring the clothes and supplies back here, it's incredible to see

how excited they are just to have new clothes and new shoes to go to school."

Felarise appreciates the hand-up the program offers, and will shortly be moving into an apartment, where she plans to look for work as a housekeeper or doing child care. In the meantime, several of her children are involved in programs that keep them busy during the day, including community service projects.

Her daughter Violet, age 14, was anticipating a new school year while balancing pizza on a paper plate at the Road Home Wednesday. "I think it's cool that they care that we actually get something that fits." She had nothing but praise for the people and programs at the Road Home.

Same goes for Joe Ortega and Rose Jensen. Both lifetime Salt Lake County residents, they found themselves at the shelter after Jensen had a stroke and couldn't work, and Ortega lost his job. They waited five months to get into a family unit, and said they're grateful not to be separated, like they were previously.

The couple provided sizes for their children, ages 10 and 11. One was swimming and the other was away at day camp.

"It's so helpful for the kids with school coming," Jensen said. "It's the first time we've been in this situation. ... We're trying to get things back together. Once we can get into a permanent place, we'll hopefully find jobs. It's been rough looking lately, but I think it's getting better."

"These people just try to support us any way they can," Ortega said. "We appreciate the help."

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