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Operation Backpack Sends Hope To NYC Homeless Kids

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The annual Operation Backpack NYC campaign led by Volunteers of America and its spokesperson Paige Davis is in full swing now through July 24 in New York City. The facts are simple: New York City has an estimated 11,000 school-age children who are homeless right now. They'll be headed to school in September without the supplies they need to succeed. In fact, not having the basics like a backpack and the tools that come with it can be so shameful they don't want to go to school at all. Operation Backpack works now to buy new backpacks and fill them with age-appropriate supplies (hand sanitizer and washable markers for little kids, a thesaurus and calculator for high school students and so on) and gets them into the hands of the kids who desperately need them in time for the start of school in September. If you're in NYC, you can drop off supplies or new backpacks at any Duane Reade throughout the five boroughs and beyond (check here for a full listing of drop-off sites). And anyone can donate anything they can afford right here. VoA estimate it costs \$35 to provide a new backpack, supplies and the knowledge that somebody cares to a 4th grader.

Here's an email chat I had with spokesperson Paige Davis about the campaign, which has sprouted up around the country. An actress, author and TV personality as host of *Trading Spaces*, Davis has been involved with this campaign for years.

What's the goal for Operation Backpack 2011?

Paige Davis: Last year Operation Backpack distributed more than 7,000 filled backpacks with grade-specific supplies to children in need. But each year we exceed our previous mark. This year our goal is to distribute at least 9,000, and we need all the help we can get.

Why backpacks? I assume it's because at-risk kids may not have a permanent address but can always take a backpack with them anywhere.

Paige Davis: Feeling different, or even ashamed, can be one of the greatest deterrents to a homeless child going to school. Operation Backpack strives to help children from homeless shelters look and feel like their housed classmates. Most kids have backpacks these days, and picking out a backpack at the beginning of the school year has become a rite of passage. Also, Volunteers Of America doesn't just drop school supplies in random boxes or bundles at the shelters. We get lists from each shelter of how many boys and girls in each grade [are staying there]. Each and every backpack becomes its own gift bag with ALL the grade-specific school supplies for each individual child. Kids from grades Pre-K thru 12th grade are supplied with everything from watercolors and crayons for the younger grades, to calculators and dictionaries for the older kids.

You must have seen these backpacks -- or just the fact that people are reaching out -- make an impact in so many lives. What's the most moving part of the campaign for you?

Paige Davis: I like that we get the public involved. Operation Backpack serves as much as a public awareness campaign as it does a collection drive. With official drop locations at every Duane Reade store, any person can contribute. And I simply love how tangible all of it is. Giving money to a charity can be

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easy (and believe me, we will take the money! - www.OperationBackpackNYC.org). But it's so rewarding to pick out packs and supplies, and be involved in the actual packing and sorting of the backpacks. There's something very moving about knowing that each and every backpack that passes through my hands will end up directly in the hands of a child who needs it.

Work like this is an example of celebrities giving back, but I'm certain you feel you get more out of it than you ever put in. Tell me what being involved with Operation Backpack means to you.

Paige Davis: Sometimes, receiving a backpack from VOA is the first time a child feels anyone believes in them, and their ability to go to school and succeed. Seeing the looks on the children's faces when they receive their school supplies is priceless and beyond words. You don't see many smiles in a homeless shelter, so to see a young girl or boy thrilled with their new crayons or folders or glue is so fulfilling. That smile represents something these children rarely feel -- hope.

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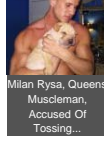
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