

14th Year Winter Clothes to Poor New Yorkers

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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One cold Saturday in December, Willie Benson rose in the early hours and reached the church in South Bronx at three o'clock. Rubbing his hands to keep warm against the bitter cold, he waited patiently for Tzu Chi to begin its annual distribution of winter clothes.

In his 40s, Willie is the sole breadwinner in his family of five; he is one of the 75 per cent of the population in South Bronx, a district in the north of New York City, who live below the poverty line. The Big Apple is one of the richest cities in the world; for many, winter means a skiing holiday or a trip to Paris. But, for tens of thousands of others who cannot afford to keep their families properly fed and clothed, it means freezing temperatures, biting winds and empty stomachs. Their plight has worsened with the financial crisis, with fewer jobs and less welfare.

So, for the 14th consecutive year, Tzu Chi volunteers in New York organized a distribution of winter clothing and quilts. They loaded the truck and, by the time they reached the church, a long queue had formed, with Willie Benson at the front. He was wearing the sweater he received from the distribution last year and hopes to receive more for himself and his family. "I came because I want this sweater and coats for my kids and we are not as fortunate as we were last year. It's beautiful to help the community, because many of them do not work. When you come, you donate stuff to us. It is a big blessing. We greatly appreciate it."

With the help of a Tzu Chi volunteer, he selected a coat with a hood and clothes and a nice pair of boots for his wife Tammy and their children. Now in her mid-40s, Tammy lost the ability to work five years ago due to an accident in the kitchen. The family lives off Willie's irregular income from odd jobs. Life is a struggle. Their home is a government apartment with simple decoration; most of their furniture comes from donations or what they find on the street. They are very grateful for Tzu Chi's winter coat drive. To show his gratitude, Willie picks up a Tzu Chi bamboo coin bank to which he can contribute, however modestly.

The Bensons are typical of thousands of New Yorkers who live below the poverty line. Often they have to choose between a winter coat and a proper meal for the family. It is to meet the needs of these people that Tzu Chi in New York has organized a winter coat drive every year since 1996. In November, volunteers collect new and slightly used clothes through advertisements in the local media and word-of-mouth. They divide them carefully into different sizes and categories, to meet the demands of the recipients.



"The clothes were sorted by our volunteers," said one of them, Anthony Chan. "We remove those that cannot be worn. If they are dirty, we wash them. If they are missing a few buttons, we put them on." This winter they collected more than 100,000 winter coats and 100 quilts, a third less than a year ago, because of the financial crisis. They have organized three distributions,

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which will help more than 1,000 families before the depths of winter. The volunteers carefully separate the items into different categories, like coats, trousers, sweaters, bags and toys. They are responsible to see that the clothes fit the size and needs of the recipients; they take home only those that fit properly.

For Peggy Reyes, it is the second time at a Tzu Chi winter distribution centre. She is looking for a large-size coat this year. "I was impressed by the patience of the volunteers last year. They were very helpful in finding the sizes I needed. So I can keep my money in my wallet. I get the hooded coat for the rain and I'm looking good for New York. The money is very tight, you know. I live on a fixed income, so I need it."

Henry Lajara, director of the Center for Community Justice, told the volunteers that it was a very needy community which came to the church. "It is people of color who are basically welfare and food stamp recipients. We try to help them in any way we can. We really appreciate your help in participating here with us today."

Anthony Chan said that the distribution also aimed to help local residents have a good holiday. "Hopefully, the winter coat drive will let everyone know that the poor can also have a happy Christmas. I hope everyone will support them."

Thanks to the warmth provided by these clothes from Tzu Chi, thousands of poor residents in New York will have the strength to fight the strong winds, heavy snow and sub-zero temperatures this winter and welcome the New Year in a joyful spirit.

Source: Daai TV Tzu Chi This Week