

A gem of a program: Coats for Kids

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As community fund-raisers go, this one at the UMass/Boston campus Center had all the trappings of a big-time event. With more than 800 people in attendance, Diane Patrick, the state's First Lady, said a few words, as did state senator Sonia Chang-Diaz.

But what made the 6th annual Community Gems gala a little more distinctive were the workshops for children parents. The younger group were busy making treasure boxes as and having their faces painted, while adults made fleece scarves and holiday cards that will be distributed to senior citizens in the community.

More important was the launching of the non-profit collaborative's latest program. "Coats for Kids" will provide 2,000 new coats, hats, and scarves to youth served by the Community Gems organizations: Children's Services of Roxbury, Boston Higher Education Resource Institute, YouthBuild Boston, Inc., La Alianza Hispana; and Roxbury Youthworks, Inc.

Rev. June Cooper, executive director of City Mission Society of Boston, which implemented the program, said the idea originated when she met a woman wearing three "hoodies" instead of a winter coat. The woman explained that her coat had been stolen and she had no money to replace it.

The conversation made Cooper more aware that many children also don't have coats for this winter season.

The coats were purchased from Hip Zepi, a hip-hop clothing store in Downtown Crossing. Later in the evening, several teens strutted down a red carpet in the Campus Center ballroom for a brief fashion show for

the new coats they had received.

Denver, a 17-year-old with Roxbury Youth Works, Inc., received a coat that evening and said that "Coats for Kids" is a "very constructive program." Also receiving a coat was Victoria, 16, who said the program was "really generous, because kids out there really need coats."

The fundraising event also honored five outstanding youth from the Gem agencies who have "succeeded

despite great adversity:" Jessica Munoz, Corey Hills, Wilda Velez Reyes, Felishia Barros and Clifton Gethers. Each of them received a new Dell laptop computer to reward their success.

Stephen Woods, president of Citizens Bank Mass., which helped form Community Gems and funded "Coats for Kids" with a \$50,000 grant from its Foundation, said, "we feel it's important to really give back to the communities in which our employees and our customers live and work."

At the event, he added, "it's priceless . . . to see the youth that benefit from these services [and] to see their lives nourished."



Newly elected city At-Large City Councillor Felix Arroyo stands in the middle of Dorchester Academy

