

## Pierce teams up with a Walking Shield

Walking Shield is a non-profit designed to donate toys to American Indian children

By [Rosalinda Pena/ Roundup](#)

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Students and faculty alike from the Agriculture and Child Development Departments showed their generosity as they collected enough donations to distribute over 300 backpacks.

The bags were filled with clothing, toys, toiletries and school supplies for children in need through the non-profit group Walking Shield American Indian Society on Nov 13.

The students of the Pre-Vet Club are in charge of the program at Pierce College.

They solicit donations, organize, purchase, pack, label, and ship the backpacks.

Donations usually come from faculty, staff, students, family, friends, and sometimes companies like Costco and Target.

The organization, which helps about 55,000 children a year across the country, was created in 1986 by Phil

Stevens, a retired defense industry engineer who is of Lakota heritage.

Walking Shield is Stevens Lakota Indian name.

Stevens grew up in East Los Angeles and was not aware of the deplorable conditions on many Indian reservations.

An invitation from a Jesuit group prompted a trip to the Oglala Sioux Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and changed that.

After his eye-opening visit to the reservation, he came back to California, sold his business, and devoted his full attention to his newly formed non-profit.

Walking Shield's mission is to improve the quality of life for American Indian families by coordinating



Joshua Cowan/ Roundup

Leland Shapiro, department chair of agriculture and natural resource, teams up with the Walking Shield American Indian Society. Together, they filled backpacks with toys to send to about 55,000 children throughout the country.

programs that provide housing, healthcare, community development support, educational assistance including college scholarships, and humanitarian aid.

Since 1987, thanks to the efforts of Dr. Leland Shapiro, Pierce has been involved with the Walking Shield Annual Holiday Gift Drive.

The mission of this program is to provide a new toy or gift to as many American Indian children as possible.

This year, Pierce faculty and students are giving hope to the children of the Shoshone Indian tribe in Idaho.

Every year a different tribe is helped. The names, ages, and sizes of 265 children were given to Shapiro so that each backpack may be tailor-made to each one of them.

Shapiro, chair of the Agriculture Department, decided to get Pierce involved with the program to help increase the school retention rate of children on America's poorest Indian reservations.

Backpacks filled with warm clothing, toys, and supplies are required to go only to children who stay in school.

"We do that as an incentive so that they want to get an education, so that they have a chance to better their lives," Stevens said. "Since we have been doing this, the principals of the various schools have told us their retention rates have gone way up."

Stevens said that 80 percent of the kid's parents are unemployed, drug addicts, or alcoholics.

One third of them are homeless, and the weather conditions could be as cold as 60 degrees below zero.

He thought it was important to include warm clothing and school supplies in the backpacks so that they have a reason to keep going to school, especially when it gets cold.

This year, one of Shapiro's students, Elaina Widjaja, hand knitted 250 scarves to help the children stay warm.

It took her about five months to finish them.

The Child Development Department gets involved by sponsoring backpacks for the pre-school aged children.

This year it was given the names, ages, and sizes of 50 children age three to six.

Assistant professor Traci Drelen is the coordinator for the backpack drive for the department.

"People were so generous this year that we were actually able to fill 80 backpacks," said Drelen. "The extra 30 backpacks were filled by students based on gender and size. The department was delighted to be able to contribute so many backpacks for such an important cause."

Amanda Izen, a Child Development major, volunteered her time for the gift drive because she has a passion for children and wants the best for them.

"If you put yourself in those children's shoes, wouldn't you want someone to send you warm clothes and show you that your life matters?"

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