The days are growing shorter and the temperatures are getting colder, which means its time to pack away the shorts and break out those long sleeves. But jackets and coats, while a commodity most of us take for granted, are often hard to come by for the homeless and impoverished in our communities. One young, compassionate Hoosier has decided to help meet this need for less fortunate Kentuckiana residents in recent years and, amazingly, she's accomplishing her goal – one free coat at a time.

"It started when I was in second grade, I was 7," says Makenzie Smith, the founder of Makenzie's Coat Closet. "My teacher was talking to us about helping the homeless and the class started talking about ways we could help. I went home and told my parents that I wanted to collect coats for the less fortunate."

With her parents full support, Makenzie started asking family and friends to donate new and gently used coats, ending up with a collection of 79 coats by the end of that first year. Seven years later, Makenzie's Coat Closet continues to gather momentum with nearly 10,000 jackets and other articles of winter clothing amassed and distributed since 2006.

The scope of Smith's grassroots organization has also grown since its inception. 54 businesses, organizations and churches are now serving as drop-off centers for Coat Closet donations all across southern Indiana, and even parts of Louisville and LaGrange. "We drop the boxes off in September and then collect them the week before Thanksgiving," says Carrie Smith, Makenzie's mother. Its still a little too early to call, but the Smiths estimate they've collected around 1,000 coats so far this season.

Those interested in picking up a jacket may do so this year at the Society of St. Vincent dePaul's campus, where the Smiths will be opening their distribution center

soon. Coats are the mainstay of their charity, however, Makenzie encourages people to donate any kind of warm clothing they can afford to.

Makenzie explained how the distribution system works, saying "They show their ID and then they can pick out one coat per family member, and then they can pick out scarfs and gloves and things like that." In addition to the Smith's regular distribution, they also donate some of their winter wares to New Albany-Floyd County, Clark County, Jefferson County, and Salem Community schools, as well as a multitude of other local organizations who can connect with people in need.

Her generosity is certainly not going unnoticed. Electric Consumer, Indiana's electric cooperative community, recently announced that Makenzie was one of five youths chosen to receive this year's statewide "Youth, Power and Hope" Award. The Smiths will be traveling to Indianapolis on December 4 to attend an award ceremony honoring Makenzie and the other recipients.

Another exciting milestone came when Makenzie's Coat Closet was officially recognized as a 501 (c) 3 organization earlier this year. Carrie Smith says achieving nonprofit status has been a two year process, but one that will prove very helpful for the organization moving forward. "It will help us in getting donations," she said. All monetary donations to the Coat Closet go towards the purchase of new coats for their constantly growing collection.

Makenzie is currently an 8th grader at Borden Jr.-Sr. High School and says that she plans to stay at the helm of the Coat Closet’s operations for the foreseeable future, even after her high school career is behind her. For now, the Smiths are more interested in nurturing their organization and figuring out how they can reach even more people with their generosity. They’re immediate expansion plans see them moving more drop boxes into out-of-state territory. “We’re planning to move more into Kentucky,” Makenzie said.

To find a donation drop-off center near you, visit www.makenziescoatcloset.com or visit them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/makenziecoat. You can also contact Makenzie for more information at 812-923-9272 or makenzie.smith@makenziescoatcloset.com.