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Packing up hope, one backpack at a time

Register Pajaronian

By: Todd Guild

Jacob Fritsch was excited about starting the third grade. He was wanted to see his friends, learn about the Ohlone Indians and especially play sports. But his family couldn't afford new school supplies for Jacob, or a backpack in which to keep them.

Now, thanks to the Write Start Program, Jacob has his backpack — black and chock full of crayons, scissors and a passel of other supplies.

“I'm ready now,” said the smiling 8-year-old.

Jacob is one of about 1,000 children across Santa Cruz County who have been given a free backpack full of school implements by the Write Start Program, in operation since 1989.

It distributes the backpacks to nonprofit organizations like the Walnut Avenue Womens' Center and to families in transition, who may be homeless or living in public housing.

“We're definitely still looking to collect more,” said Karen Lemon, coordinator of the program, operated through the Santa Cruz County Office of Education.

Earlier this week, Lemon was down to 250 backpacks, and, with school set to begin next week, 300 more kids are on a waiting list.

“I appreciate that the community realized that the basic needs of kids have to be met in order to access successful learning,” she said.

A cadre of volunteers from across the county helps with donations, stuffing the backpacks and distributing them to needy children.

“I do it because it feels good to help people,” said Cathy Ferguson, 14, of Santa Cruz, as she filled backpacks for high school students. Ferguson will be starting at Soquel High School Wednesday.

“I don't think we're ever done,” said Christopher Bushard, whose 11-year old daughter Autumn collected more than \$600 to buy backpacks.

The Bushard family dropped off their last shipment Wednesday, and met a family who was picking up one of the donated backpacks. As they turned to leave, the family thanked Autumn for the work she had done.

“That was the best thing that could have happened,” said Bushard.

The Write Start Program is always looking for donations of backpacks and school supplies. The organization needs crayons and colored pencils, three-ring binders, notebook paper and glue sticks. Lemon says she also needs Spanish-English dictionaries and calculators.

“When you go out and buy a backpack for a child, it’s kind of like a big hug,” said Lemon.

Anyone wishing to donate can call Lemon at 477-5422. In Pajaro Valley, call 761-6125.