

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Blessing of the Backpacks

This is a story about people: those who receive and those who give. As we began our collections of backpacks and school supplies this year, I began contacting schools. As a result, I received this response from Mary Margaret Lynn, Principal at Ocean Academy:

We would be very happy to participate in the Backpack Blessing on August 29th. I attended last year, and Ocean Academy was very grateful to receive 16 fully stocked bags! The students who received these packs were so delighted! Many of them never had brand new backpacks before, let alone a bag stocked with all those goodies!!!! So please keep us on your list of recipients of the bags. Sixteen bags was a perfect number...just enough. And we will trust your judgment with regard to the contents. You did a great job last year! I am looking forward to seeing you in August! Hopefully, it will be as beautiful an evening as it was last year!

I also received a phone call from Mona L. She wondered if her son, Matthew, could receive a backpack. I assured her that yes, we would definitely set one aside for him. He was at the blessing Sunday night and announced, "I'm glad it's green – it's my favorite color." Pamela called. Her son, a 17 year old with autism and a degenerative disk disorder also needed a backpack, "but, could we get one with wheels?" As for supplies, she said, "we don't need much – just some loose leaf paper and 'clicky' pens; we'll use the folders we have from last year." Pamela didn't



Maud Abrams Students (foreground); Ocean Academy (background)

have enough gas in her car to pick up her son's backpack, but rest assured he will get it – filled with loose leaf paper, 'clicky' pens. . . and new folders and binders. Two students from Maud Abrams were at the blessing Sunday night. They heard we were giving away backpacks that night and wondered if we had some for them. We did. After the blessing when we all came inside to eat a hot dog dinner, the two of them were on the sofa, uneaten hotdogs on the table in front of them, excitedly going through their new packs. "Look! It's even new stuff inside!" one of them exclaimed. It's a story about receiving.

But friends, it is also a story about giving, about generous hearts, about giving even when it seems there may not be enough to go around. I cannot tell you how many parishioners from each church came up to me and said, "Pastor, I can't give very much, but I want to help" as they placed a \$5 bill in my hand. Bev Larson sent letters to local businesses asking for donations. Mysteriously, a case – a CASE – of Crayola® crayons appeared in the church office - a local Stone Harbor business man wanting to give something back. Herr's Food, through its Herr's Has Heart program was able to supply us with more than 500 bags of chips at \$0.12 per bag. All they asked in return was for a photo of the event. Andrea Nowack contacted Gaiss' Deli in Villas and connected with one of their "meat guys" Ed Dworchak who is also a parishioner at St. Barnabas. He donated 200 hot dogs. As I was shopping for additional supplies to "round out" our collection, the manager of a local office supply company waived the 3 per customer limit on rulers so that we could purchase 39 rulers at one penny each (I have 13 separate receipts, each for \$0.03 as evidence of her generosity). At Wal-Mart, as I was loading my shopping cart with markers, another shopper commented, "Oh, a teacher's work never ends." When I explained that actually I was shopping to fill nearly 100 packs with school supplies for local children she smiled and said, "What a nice idea." About 5 minutes later, she came looking for me to give me \$5 – "just a little something to help."



"Herr's Has Heart" (Andrea Nowack, Amy Lamach)

This is a story about people: those who receive and those who give. And it is a story about blessings. We were blessed this year by two coordinators – Bev Larson and Andrea Nowack – who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make sure we’d have the publicity we needed before the event and the food we needed at the event. We were blessed by Pastor Tommy, his wife, and their youth group from a church outside of Buffalo, New York who just happened to be at the This ‘n’ That Thrift Shop doing a service project, when we pulled up with our car full of packs and supplies. In just over 1 hour, those helping hands prepared 55 packs for distribution. And we were blessed again when a donation of 25 packs and bags of school supplies came in on Friday from Offshore Getty (Villas) and Dina Ziemba and her kids (Meg, Stanley, and Jennette) just happened to be at The Branches and volunteered to fill those packs the next day . . . and blessed again by the grandchildren of Doris Dorsett who also just happened to be at The Branches on Saturday and offered to help the Ziemba family.



Only one of the carloads of donated supplies

blessing food baskets, and then it hit us – why not bless backpacks!?! Better still, why not collect backpacks and school supplies for area children and then hold a blessing of the backpack event at The Branches. And we did.

In 2009, we collected more than 70 packs, filled them with school supplies and distributed them to the elementary schools in Lower Township, to Ocean Academy in Middle Township, and to several area social workers. This year, things got bigger. We collected 96 backpacks, enough supplies



Sebastian Crafts and Jennette Ziemba receive a blessing.

to fill them all, and a little more than \$500 in cash donations which were used to buy more school supplies and to adopt a classroom. Supplies were distributed once again to the three elementary schools in Lower Township, to Ocean Academy and to Glenwood Avenue Elementary (Wildwood), Crest Memorial (Wildwood Crest), Catholic Charities, Caring for Kids and The Arc of Cape May County.

But, it isn’t about the numbers, it’s not even about the backpacks; it’s about the people and God’s generous spirit flowing through those people – this is a story about blessings!

Dear God, please bless these students, who begin a new year of study. May they greet each school day with open ears and hearts, finding you in classrooms and lunchrooms, homework and gym class, new faces and old friends. Keep them healthy and safe as they learn and grow. Please bless these backpacks, and all the symbols of our school work. Use these signs to remind us that you are with us in all the work we do and all the places we go. When our study and friendships make us excited or frustrated, strong or anxious, tired or hopeful, help us know that you are with us, to share our joys and help carry the load, in the name of Jesus, your Son, who worked and walked with us, and the Holy Spirit, who brings us new life. Amen.

- Pastor Debra+