

By CAITLIN DINEEN, Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, September 1, 2010



The Rev. Debra Bullock, left, of St. Barnabas by the Bay Episcopal Church in Villas and St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Stone Harbor, and Rector John Sosnowski, of St. Mary's, blessed dozens of backpacks filled with school supplies that were given away Sunday in Rio Grande.



Photo by: Danny Drake

The organization process of the second annual "Blessing of the Backpacks" backpack collection began in May, before area schools even had let out for summer vacation. The Rev. Debra Bullock, who splits her time between St. Barnabas by the Bay Episcopal Church in Villas and St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Stone Harbor, said it didn't matter that school was still in session. The collection process needed to begin.

"It's a great way to start off the school year," Bullock said, adding that because local schools are operating later into the summer than usual due to a snowy winter, the event caught both school officials and church organizers off guard. Bullock said the backpack and school supply connection was a natural extension of services already offered at St. Barnabas and St. Mary's. She said St. Barnabas operates a food pantry and St. Mary's offers discount clothing and housewares in a thrift store. "It's hard enough to go to school hungry," Bullock said, adding that she couldn't imagine the first day of school without the necessary crayons, pencils and other supplies. Event organizers and other volunteers agreed and said they hoped people would continue to support their neighbors.

Andrea Nowack, a co-organizer from St. Barnabas, said she understands the economic downturn makes it difficult for people to donate to the second annual event, but she said - despite that difficulty - it is important people continue to reach out to those in need. Nowack said she was surprised by donations given that have come in. "This year, almost everything we needed has been donated," she said, adding people have been generous with their "spirit and supplies." Last year, Nowack, a Cape May Court House resident, volunteered as a backpack filler. "It's been a surprisingly rewarding experience," Nowack said.

Beverly Larson, the organizer representing St. Mary's, said this was her first year working with the event, but, so far, it has been an enjoyable experience. "I enjoy it," said Larson, an Avalon resident. "Anything we can do to reach out to the Rio Grande area, and other areas as well, is wonderful." Larson said she thought people continued to donate to the annual event, despite the economic downturn, because local residents understand it is important to support their neighbors in need. "If we can support them, that's what we as good neighbors need to do," she said.

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How to help

People interested in donating to the backpack and school supply collections, or interested in contributing to future church collections, can call St. Barnabas at 609-886-5960 or St. Mary's at 609-368-5922.