

SUNDAY, AUGUST 22, 2010



Peter Chen / The Post-Standard

ISABELLA BEDELL, 6, of Syracuse, reacts Saturday to the 11-foot albino Burmese python that Diana Sleiartin, of Jordan, is holding as Isabella and her brother, Joseph, 8, pose for a picture with it at the Youth Day Barbecue. Sleiartin is owner of MaxMan Reptile Rescue.

COMMUNITY

Annual event helps needy and promotes education

Every year, Mary Nelson organizes a Youth Day Barbecue and school supply giveaway in Syracuse. And benefiting were 15,000 youngsters who received backpacks stuffed with school supplies. **B-1**



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SANAA SMITH, 5, of Syracuse dances with her group, Party People, at Mary Nelson's ninth annual Youth Day Barbecue, on South Salina Street, Syracuse.

They Had Kids' Back(pack)s

Thousands turn out for giveaways of school supplies

By Lyndra Vassar
Contributing writer

Mary Nelson's ninth annual Youth Day Barbecue and school supply giveaway took place Saturday in Syracuse, and once again grew tremendously from the previous year's.

Last year, 9,000 youngsters registered to receive a free backpack with school supplies. This year, about 15,000 signed up.

More than 1,000 organizations — from small church groups to large organizations such as the Syracuse City School District and Crouse Hospital — helped to sponsor or to otherwise support the event.

Mary Nelson organized about 400 volunteers to keep the event running smoothly. It began at 11 a.m. with a youth parade on South Salina Street.

"Listen up!" Nelson yelled, rallying the crowd to start the parade. "I want everyone to chant, 'This is the ninth annual Youth Day Barbecue.'"

Smiling parents and children followed her lead, marching down South Salina Street near Colvin Street.

Nelson's nephew, Darryl Patterson, died in June 2002 at age 23 from a gunshot wound. In his memory, Nelson held the first youth day barbecue as an anti-violence tactic.

"When I first started, this was about my nephew," Nelson said. "But now I can fill a need in my community."

At 1 p.m., the backpack giveaway began for those who registered. The supplies were organized in buffet-style tables. Parents picked their choice of

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— Mary Nelson,
organizer of ninth annual
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supplies for pre-K youngsters through college-age.

"I like that she holds this event every year," said Kristina Wilkerson, who was first in line to get a backpack for her 7-year-old granddaughter. "It really helps a bunch of needy kids."

The help didn't stop with supplies. Along three blocks of Salina Street, near the Beauchamp branch library, nearly 60 businesses, organizations and community groups set up booths offering information and services.

Say Yes to Education, a nonprofit agency, was among them. The agency has pledged to secure free college tuition for every city child who graduates from high school in the city school district. At its booth, Say Yes handed out balloons, pencils and pamphlets explaining the program and emphasizing the importance of staying in school.

The nearby People's AME Zion Church held a free clothing drive with tables of shirts, shoes, sweaters and coats.

Crouse Hospital gave free blood pressure screenings to about 300 peo-

ple and provided health proxy cards and medication logs.

"It's really a great event," said Leesa Kelly, manager of community health outreach at Crouse Hospital. "The average cost of school supplies is \$40, so this isn't just for people who don't have money. It's for people with four or five kids."

Kelly said the event focuses the attention of parents and children on the importance of education and staying in school.

Although she didn't attend, Mayor Stephanie Miner issued a proclamation declaring Aug. 21 as the official Mary Nelson Youth Day Barbecue Recognition Day.

Nelson's youth day was not the only giveaway of school supplies Saturday.

On the North Side, the Father's Heart Ministries, 909 Butternut St., handed out about 750 backpacks to children. Pastor James Gebhardt said another 50 backpacks will be given to children in the congregation and in affiliated ministries.

The backpacks came with pencils, pens, glue sticks and notebooks.

For the event's seventh year, Gebhardt has organized the giveaway, which started with about 50 backpacks in 2003. Last year, about 700 backpacks were distributed.

In addition, Gebhardt's church handed out 1½ tons of vegetables donated by Matthew 25 Farms, in Tully, which gives food free to the needy and teaches community members how to grow their own crops.

Contact Lyndra Vassar at lvassar@syracuse.com or 470-2259.