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Ministry tucks joy into return-to-school backpacks

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KEMPSVILLE

Danette Crawford said anticipating the first day of school should be an exciting time with new clothes and shoes, new backpacks filled with fresh supplies and lots of smiling faces.

Instead, it can be a stressful time for single mothers.

"Low-income and single-parent homes are trying to make it through the month with normal bills. It's a real burden with the additional back-to-school needs," said Crawford, who is the founder and president of Kempsville-based Joy Ministries.

Crawford, a single parent with one daughter, started the evangelistic outreach in 1989.

In addition to doing other outreaches throughout the year, she helps children and single mothers prepare for the new school year through the First Day Challenge.

Crawford recalled speaking with a single mother of five about her childhood first-day memories.

"She said so many kids would laugh and tease her all year long. That's when I challenged people to help make



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that first day an awesome one for these kids," she said.

The inaugural First Day Challenge, held seven years ago, distributed 65 sets of backpacks to those in need.

This year's goal is to supply 2,000 children in kindergarten through 12th grade throughout Hampton Roads with backpacks full of school supplies.

Two buses will travel into five of Joy Ministries' adopted neighborhoods to deliver the backpacks, and an

inspirational message, before school starts. Mothers in need who do not reside in an adopted neighborhood can make an appointment to see if they qualify.

Crawford also created a personal goal to give 100 children with extreme needs \$100 worth of school clothes each.

Additionally, Crawford started a summer reading camp six years ago with eight-week programs in adopted neighborhoods.

Danette Crawford, founder and president of Joy Ministries, a nonprofit evangelistic outreach ministry, joins children in the Summer Reading Camp in singing their words.

changing for these kids," said Crawford.

At graduation, each student receives a trophy and a \$50 gift card for back-to-school clothes. Not only that, but Crawford explained, "If you teach a child to read, it's a ticket out of poverty."

Avalon resident Denise Elliott, 31, said that Joy Ministries has made a difference in her life. Elliott and her three children – twins Antoine and Destinee, 9, and Dionte, 6 – recently moved from one of the outreach's adopted neighborhoods.

"I used to wait for the bus to receive school supplies. I've been there and seen what a blessing it is for this ministry to come into your neighborhood," said Elliott, an administrative assistant for Joy Ministries.

"I get to turn around and go into the neighborhoods and encourage the moms. But I'm on the other side now."

To sponsor a child or make a donation toward the First Day Challenge, call Joy Ministries at 420-2625. The nonprofit is at 1446 Kempsville Road, Suite 203. Visit www.joyministriesonline.org.

"The greatest root of the problem for these kids was many of them can't read. If they can't read they have a problem in every subject," she said.

Youngsters learn through a phonics-based program that includes singing, spelling, reading and writing with the assistance of a certified teacher.

"When they learn to read it builds their self-esteem and they are excited to go back to school and read. It's so life-

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