

Joy Ministries to provide inspiring start back to school

BY STACI DENNIS
CORRESPONDENT

A couple of book bags and a Sunday school class has helped Zenia Thomas raise her four children.

"Little things mean a lot," the Virginia Beach resident said. "Life can get hard, but when someone else shows they are thinking about you, then it makes it a little easier."

Thomas has been the recipient of various neighborhood outreaches done throughout Hampton Roads by Joy Ministries, led by Danette Crawford.

For more than six years Thomas has received from the nonprofit backpacks full of school supplies, clothes for her children and a Mother's Day dinner - all free of charge.

"A lot of kids don't have the opportunity to have these things or go to fun places if it wasn't for Joy Ministries," Thomas said. "I thank God for them because they have truly blessed all our lives."

Crawford started Joy Ministries six years ago after searching for aid in sending her



Danette Crawford, founder of Joy Ministries, based in Virginia Beach, is distributing more than 2,000 backpacks with school supplies that she is helping hand out on buses driven into neighborhoods throughout Hampton Roads this week, including the Homecrest Mobile Home Park in Chesapeake.

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daughter, Destiny, to a private Christian school. As a single mother, she struggled to make ends meet.

"I feel like God told me

that I had to get my eyes off myself," the Virginia Beach resident said. "I didn't want to pout and feel sorry for myself, but instead do something to be

a part of changing someone's life."

The first time Crawford collected book bags and filled them with school supplies, she handed out 65 sets. This year she will distribute more than 2,000.

Book bags are filled with notebook paper, pencils, pens, folders, crayons, glue sticks, scissors, a ruler, pencil box and fruit snacks. Each book bag is valued at about \$30, she said.

In addition to the back-to-school First Day Challenge, Crawford also has a television ministry, a back-to-work program, summer reading camp, Mother's Day celebration, holiday outreaches, kid's club and the Destiny Scholarship Fund in honor of her daughter.

"It's a radical step of faith to be a blessing to someone else when you are in need," she said. "These kids are like my own children, and I want them to know God loves and cares for them."

Over the past week, Crawford has been distributing backpacks in subsidized housing areas throughout Hampton

Roads and will conclude that effort Saturday, including residents of the Homecrest Mobile Home Park off Portlock and Campostella roads. Buses loaded with the bags will be driven into neighborhoods, and children will enter the bus, hear a message from Crawford and choose a backpack.

"People need to know there are needs to be met in our own backyard," Crawford said. "We can start making change right here in our own community."

Children in kindergarten through 12th grade are eligible for a backpack. Bags can also be picked up at the Joy Ministries office if a family financially qualifies.

"They have taught my kids a lot about God, the Bible and helping others," Thomas said. "I have learned about what I can do because they have helped me, too."

■ For more information about Joy Ministries, call 420-2625 or visit www.joyministriesonline.org.

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