

# Hundreds of foster children, caregivers receive school supplies at inaugural fair

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Isabella Francisco, 8, Silvia Francisco, 6, and Andrea Francisco, 5, learn about the after-school program at Naples Academy of Martial Arts from Maria LaRocco, a volunteer at the academy. About 175 foster care children came to Golden Gates Community Center on Saturday to receive the back to school essentials. (Claire Aronson/Staff)

NAPLES, Fla. - Stan Appelbaum could relate to the foster children at the Friends of Foster Children's Back to School Fair Saturday.

He was once one of them.

Appelbaum, 82, president emeritus and one of the founders of Friends of Foster Children of Southwest Florida, grew up in the foster care system and in orphanages during the Great Depression.

On Saturday, he was able to see how much the nonprofit has grown since its founding in 2000.

"There is nothing that makes me happier than just watching this," Appelbaum said at the nonprofit's inaugural fair sponsored by Arthrex. "It takes a village to raise a child. You are looking at the village."

FFC in partnership with other local organizations including the Naples Children & Education Foundation provided children with back-to-school items at the Golden Gate Community Center from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. In the past, foster families received a Walmart gift card to purchase necessities, but Jane Billings, FFC's executive director, said they wanted a way to reach out to the children and caregivers directly.

"Because of this (event), we will be able to give four times as much of things than a gift card will buy," she said, adding that 175 children were registered for Saturday's fair and they expected 400 people including caregivers to attend.

The foster children and caregivers circled the community center's gym, receiving uniforms, shoes, backpacks, pajamas, haircuts, books and vision tests — all for free. Organizations including Angels Undercover, Laces for Love, the Collier County Bar Association, Bedtime Bundles, Runway International, Scholastic and Florida's Vision Quest provided the items and services.

"It's great to see all the organizations in Collier County come together to benefit the kids in Collier County because we all need to be concerned about all the children," said Claudia Polzin, a board member of Angels Undercover. "I am delighted to be a part of it."

There were also booths for the children to sign-up for after-school programs.

Maria LaRocco, a volunteer with Naples Academy of Martial Arts — which offers after-school programs — said martial arts allows the children to keep working toward a positive goal.

"(They learn) the dignity and self-respect that comes through martial arts that can't really be replicated anywhere else," LaRocco said. "We have several students from FFC and they just love it. It is a chance to connect with kids with similar interests."

About 60 volunteers helped pass out items to the children and showed families around the fair.

Steven Liries, a foster caregiver, said he spent about \$300 on school supplies last year for the four children he takes care of so Saturday's event was a major help.

"Every little bit helps," the East Naples resident said.

Billings said she hopes the back to school fair can become an annual event.

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