

Rox kids go back to school prepared

Shelly Runyon

Squeals of excitement echoed off the walls of the Yawkey Center Boys and Girls Club in Roxbury last Friday as hundreds of school-aged kids and teens picked up their new backpacks.

Andrea Swain, executive director of the Yawkey Center Boys and Girls Club led the event. As they rushed to the front of the line, she directed two, three, sometimes four children, and teens at a time toward the mountains of backpacks. As the students got their bags they threw them over their shoulder or hugged them, and immediately began to brag about the color.

"Their energy, their excitement," Swain said, "It's exciting, it keeps me young!" The backpacks were provided

going back to school.

"Can you imagine that if you're a teen and you don't have a backpack, pens, a TI calculator, a compass, all of the things you need for school," she said, "you can't complete assignments if you don't have the necessary tools."

These tools are costly, but necessary to keep teens' heads in their work. "If we want to prevent dropout rates and [keep] young people passing the MCAS then we have to look at supporting teens as well in that effort," she said.

Cradles to Crayons provides two variations of backpacks, one for teens and the other for children ages 5 to 8.

"The differences between the backpacks are pretty slight," said Chris Bentson, manager of foundation and corporate relations for Cradles to Crayons. For example,

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by Cradles to Crayons, a Quincy-based nonprofit, which provides children with the basic essentials they need to feel safe, warm and ready to learn.

Yawkey Center received 700 bags to give out to kids in the community. They will be handed out to camp and afterschool participants, a few will be distributed at Roxy House and Orchard Gardens, and the rest will go to community members at the Spirit of Roxbury day. Inside the backpacks were basic school supplies: pencils, pens, crayons, rulers, calculators and pencils.

Swain reached out to Cradles and Crayons more than five years ago after stressed parents in Roxbury, some with as many as six or seven children, came to Yawkey Center asking for back-to-school help. The beginning of the school year often comes with high-costs for parents and high-pressure for kids and teens to not only look their best, but to be ready to perform their best as well. This is especially true for teens — a population Swain says is underserved when it comes to being prepared for

the backpack for younger kids has crayons and pencils, while the backpack for teens contains colored pencils, mechanical pencils and pens instead.

He said for large distributions it is important that the bags are standardized for specific ages.

"When we do a big distribution like this we can actually say pretty confidently that all of the backpacks have the same supplies and everything is brand new," Bentson explained.

For initiatives like the Ready for School campaign, Cradles to Crayons purchases school supplies in bulk at a cost of \$15 per student, then invites volunteers to stuff them.

Earlier this month, Cradles to Crayons held its 4th annual Backpack-a-thon where more than 400 volunteers gathered at City Hall Plaza to fill 15,000 backpacks with school supplies. A total of 30,000 backpacks will be distributed this fall at schools and community centers in Massachusetts.

Being able to provide centers like Yawkey with enough backpacks to go around is a great



Top: Executive Director of Yawkey Center Boys and Girls Club Andrea Swain poses with the Youth Leaders of the Yawkey Club of Roxbury. The youth leaders are paid to help out at camps during the summer. Last Friday it was their responsibility to make sure every young person got the right backpack at the Cradles to Crayons Back to School event. **Bottom:** A full house waited patiently for the next round of backpacks to be given out at the Yawkey Center Boys and Girls Club in Roxbury. (Shelly Runyon photos)

reward for the community. Swain said that this year, surprisingly, they will have enough book bags to go around.

"We thank the sponsors, Cradles to Crayons and Citizens Bank for giving young people the necessary tools to be prepared on the first day of school," she said. "Every young person wants to be prepared on the first day of school and they've given everyone already an even keeled start."

Each day,
contemplate the glory
of Guru's grace.
Prostrate from the heart
and offer him your salutations.
Revere his teachings;
love them more than
your body and prana.

— Swami Muktananda