

Project S.M.I.L.E. prepares students for start of school

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Photo By Suzanne Rehak/For the Chronicle

Carolyn Tarver, Project SMILE founder, talks to volunteers about the organization created in memory of her son, Stan.

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The cost of purchasing school supplies leaves little room for extravagance for **Charles Albers** of Sugar Land.

Albers, 76, is the sole bargain hunter for the Project S.M.I.L.E. program, which distributes school supplies to children from low-income families every year in Fort Bend County.

A member of the **Fort Bend Sugar Land Optimists Club**, Albers has been volunteering with Project S.M.I.L.E. for eight years and seeks out special deals on notebooks, crayons, rulers and other materials for students entering grades Pre-K through 12.

Project S.M.I.L.E., an abbreviation for Stan's Memory Includes Loving Everyone, has served more than 1,536 students this year through donations provided by individuals, service clubs and businesses in the community.

Sugar Land resident **Carolyn Tarver** founded the program after the death of her 17-year-old son, Stan, in 1983 and said the project distributed a total of \$9,500 in school supplies this year to students living in the 77478, 77053, 77498 and 77489 ZIP codes.

"We don't get them everything, but we get them the basics to start," Tarver, 72, said Aug. 18 as she watched volunteers from around the community assemble packages for students at **Bethel Ministry** in Stafford.

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Albers said the death of his 25-year-old son, Michael, in 1995 inspires him to remain active with the Project S.M.I.L.E. mission. He admits purchasing large quantities of individual items often presents a hefty challenge.

This year, Albers made repeated trips to Target and **Wal-Mart** stores in Sugar Land and Missouri City, and said the only items he had trouble finding were pocket folders containing brads.

Albers said that purchasing school supplies individually is cheaper than buying pre-assembled packages and said he paid more for just about every item he bought this year due to fewer advertised specials and a substantial rise in Project S.M.I.L.E. recipients.

"The number of kids that we had went up about 300 from last year, so a lot of families are probably feeling the economic pinch," Albers said.

"We had to increase our purchases because of that. It all got more expensive this year."

For Tarver, who also coordinates the Christmas outreach project, Santa's Exchange, reaching out through Project S.M.I.L.E. has generated a long-standing relationship with Bethel Ministry, a religious organization located at 3015 Fifth St. in Stafford.

Tarver said that she formally organized Bethel with its founders, Joe and **Becky Torres**, 11 years ago, yet maintains that the volunteers have been doing outreach work together for the past 22 years.

The team has generated support from a variety of local groups and individuals ranging from members of **Crossbridge Church** and Oyster Creek Rotary in Sugar Land to Archer Automotive, Stan's former place of employment.

Marshall Whichard, a volunteer with Project S.M.I.L.E. since 1988, said that the mission has grown in numbers, volunteers and reputation since it began assisting children 26 years ago.

Whichard, an active member of the **Sugar Land Masonic Lodge** and past president of the Sugar Land Rotary, said that the organizations contributed \$2,500 this year in support of Project S.M.I.L.E.'s efforts.

Whichard said that Project S.M.I.L.E. helps recipients maintain a positive mental state and confidence level and provides a resource for children who otherwise would come to school with very few materials.

"Even in a county as affluent as Fort Bend, you find these areas with groups of people who just can't afford the out-of-pocket expense to get their kids ready to go back to school," Whichard said.

"If it wasn't for project S.M.I.L.E., they would have a couple of notebooks maybe and pencils, but they wouldn't have all of the supplies that schools expect kids to have."

Tarver said that the organization received a donation of 100 backpacks and 400 boxes of Kleenex from Wal-Mart at 5501 **Texas 6** in Missouri City.

Members from **Williams Trace Baptist Church** also donated items they collected in a recent school supply drive.

The goal of Project S.M.I.L.E. is to get supplies to students before the first day of school. Tarver said she has had parents tell her numerous times that the gifts have made a difference in their child's self-esteem.