

LOCAL AUGUST 6, 2016 3:53 PM

5,000 brave the rain for free shoes, backpacks, haircuts at Convoy of Hope



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BY ROY WENZL

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Elizabeth Martinez arrived at the Bethel Life Center in south Wichita at 3:45 a.m. Saturday, three hours before the heavy rain fell, five and a half hours before the gate would open.

She'd come to the Convoy of Hope charity gathering to ask for free backpacks filled with school supplies for her children and niece and nephew. They were standing, first in line, at 7 a.m. when the rain came and lightning flashed from the south.

Behind them in line stood thousands of Wichita children and adults. Those who had umbrellas opened them when the rain came. Those without umbrellas stood stoically as cold water soaked through hair and clothes, and fogged their eyeglasses with droplets. Parents shielded infants and toddlers with rain-soaked hats or pieces of wet cardboard or plastic.

Twelve hundred volunteers had spent days prepping the grounds of the Bethel Life Center in south Wichita, setting up everything from tents to portable toilets to a child recovery center in case kids wandered from parents. In line, far behind the Martinez family, stood Sandra Collett, a grandmother pulling Ariana Orndorff, her 7-year-old granddaughter, in a little four-wheel wagon. She'd given Ariana an umbrella, which she had opened.

Ariana got soaked anyway.

The 'pay is low'

At the head of the line where the Martinez family stood, Jasline Martinez, age 6, fell asleep in the crook of her aunt Elizabeth's arm, her head resting on Elizabeth's shoulder as rainwater soaked into their skin.

They and the thousands with them had come for the free haircuts, school backpacks, immunizations, food, free shoes and more.

“

WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH MONEY TO PAY FOR THE THINGS THE SCHOOLS WANT OUR KIDS TO BRING.

Elizabeth Martinez, a Wichita mother

“My husband, Armula, he works construction, but the pay is low,” Elizabeth Martinez said. “We don't have enough money to pay for the things the schools want our kids to bring, so we come here.”

When the rain began to fall, they took cover in their car at first, but then slogged back through the wet parking lot to stand in line, Elizabeth and Jasline, and Johnny, 10, Dariel, 10, and Adrian, 13.

The man in the black fedora just behind the sisters was carrying a fold-up grocery cart; he said he'd arrived at 2 a.m. at the grounds of the Bethel Life Center at 3777 S. Meridian. Behind him were mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, two boys playing a close game of catch with a plastic ball. There was a grandmother in a wheelchair keeping close watch on her grandchildren. And there was Collett, the 49-year-old grandmother, pulling granddaughter Ariana in the wagon. Ariana is autistic and has ADHD, Collett said.

Not stereotypes

Stacie Cathcart, the Convoy of Hope Wichita event director, prayed to God into a microphone minutes before she ordered the gates opened. "We do this in your name," she called out. Hundreds of volunteers had bowed their heads to pray with her.



WE SERVE THE MARGINALIZED. WE SERVE WITHOUT JUDGING.

Stacie Cathcart, Convoy of Hope-Wichita event director

"We are not here to push Jesus down your throat," she had said, earlier in the week. "But we're not shy about showing who we are. We serve the marginalized. We serve without judging. No matter what race, what status, it doesn't matter to us. If people are non-church, they are welcome here."

In the four years she's helped run the Convoy event, she's seen thousands of Wichita's poor.

They are not the stereotypes portrayed in state and national politics, she said. "Are some taking advantage? Yes, but not many. Are some lazy? Yes, but not many."

She grinned. "Some wealthy people are lazy, too," she said.

Most of the guests who show up for Convoy of Hope in Wichita are white; most are children.

Past surveys conducted by the national charity show that 40 percent of the 82,000 people served annually by the national Convoy of Hope effort are children, said Jason Bachman, outreach director for the national Convoy of Hope Charity. Bachman attended the Saturday event in Wichita, soaked through like everybody else.

CONVOY OF HOPE PLANS AUG. 6 OUTREACH

“We see many working families here who can’t make it without help,” Cathcart said. “When we open those gates, you will see many, many children. And you will see many single moms come here, with their children.



THEY HUG OUR NECKS; THEY SHAKE OUR HANDS.

Stacie Cathcart, Convoy of Hope-Wichita event director

“We encounter gratefulness that moves me to tears,” she said. “They hug our necks; they shake our hands.

“When you see a family get tears in her eyes just because we are giving them a chance to have a family photo taken, you know where that family is coming from: They come from a place in life where they had never believed that they’d ever get to have a family portrait taken.”

Bethel Life Center’s lead pastor, Ken Squires, said his church joined the national Convoy effort because church members believe God wants them to help the marginalized. He and Cathcart say their church can do this year after year because of Wichita’s generosity.

Cargill provides hot dogs and \$5,000, Cathcart said. “The Walmart Foundation helps. Volunteer Kansas helps.” Many other organizations help.

On Saturday, as he slogged through the rainwater outside his church, Squires said the rain and lightning would likely keep many people away; the church had worried that 10,000 might show up, topping last year’s total of nearly 9,000.

THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE EXPECTED AT CONVOY OF HOPE

More than 5,000 people showed up Saturday. More than 2,500 pairs of children’s shoes and 3,000 backpacks were distributed, and 684 people had their

hair cut.

‘It helps a lot’

Collett works for Center Industries, a company she admires because they seek out and hire people with disabilities; half their workforce is disabled, Collett said. But the pay at the company she likes so much is low, she said. She has daughters and grandchildren, including Ariana.

“I support all of them,” she said. “I’m really glad to come here. It helps a lot.”

Collett said this after she and Ariana had picked out a backpack in the backpack tent. All 3,000 backpacks that Cathcart’s volunteers had stacked in there were full of school supplies, from scissors to glue sticks to paper. Children all around Collett and Ariana were holding up new backpacks, their faces beaming.

Outside, there was a long line of children and adults, standing patiently as the rain continued to fall.

Hundreds of children stood in that line.

It was the line snaking across the grass for hundreds of yards, leading to the tent where Cathcart’s Convoy volunteers handed out new shoes.

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Great job by the Bethel Life Center! Wish more mega churches would do something similar.
Also, anyone with a student in need of school uniforms or other clothing or a coat should talk to their school social worker and ask that the schools social worker contact "Operation School Bell" on their behalf. It is a program of Assistance League of Wichita. They do great work and provide a generous amount of new clothing upon the recommendation of the school social worker.

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