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Thousands turn out for free school supplies, food and fun at Westfest, Back2School Bash

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Magnolia Adanhou, 12, watches her new backpack get filled with school supplies during the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County's Back2School Bash and Westfest at Elver Park on Saturday.

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AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

Despite light rain in the afternoon, Madison's Elver Park was filled with school supplies, free food, music and children running between bounce houses and a fire truck Saturday at the second annual Westfest.

Thousands of backpacks with school supplies were handed out as part of a Back2School Bash, while Madison firefighters gave youngsters tours of a fire truck and Madison police officers let them sit on one of the department's motorcycles at the Far West Side festival.

Michael Johnson, president and CEO of the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County, said 3,000 backpacks were given away. The club was one of the sponsors of the event and gave out school supplies including pencils, notebooks, crayons and glue.

Johnson said the thousands of people who turned out represented the "fabric of the city."

"I loved the diversity that was out there," he said. "It was a melting pot. It was people having fun."

The city used to host a Fourth of July fireworks show at Elver Park, but costs of about \$50,000 and declining event sponsorship prompted city officials to cancel the fireworks show and start the Westfest event.

This year, the festival was merged with the Boys & Girls Club's back-to-school event, Johnson said.

Ald. Matt Phair, whose 20th District borders Elver Park, said Saturday's turnout was bigger than last year's and that he'd like to see the festival continue. He said costs to the city for hosting it are minimal.

"I know that the goal is to keep this going as an annual thing," Phair said.

For event attendees not about to start the school year, the event offered live music, a cookout with free brats and hot dogs, a farmer's market, craft vendors and a 3-on-3 basketball tournament with cash prizes.

A Saturday morning anti-violence march that started at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and ended near Elver Park at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church also added to the festival's attendance, Phair said.

Madison resident Ricketra Johnson said she came to the festival with her boyfriend and three children, ages 6, 5 and 4, for the free food and school supplies.

“This was definitely a good way to start the school year,” she said. “They had a good time,” she said of her children.

For 6-year-old and soon-to-be-first-grader Kari Johnson, the best part of the day was playing in the bounce houses. “It’s awesome,” he said during a break before running back to one of the two bounce houses with a sword made of balloons in his hand.

Since Johnson and her children and boyfriend are homeless, she said, she was thankful to the organizers for hosting an event where her children could play and get some school supplies.

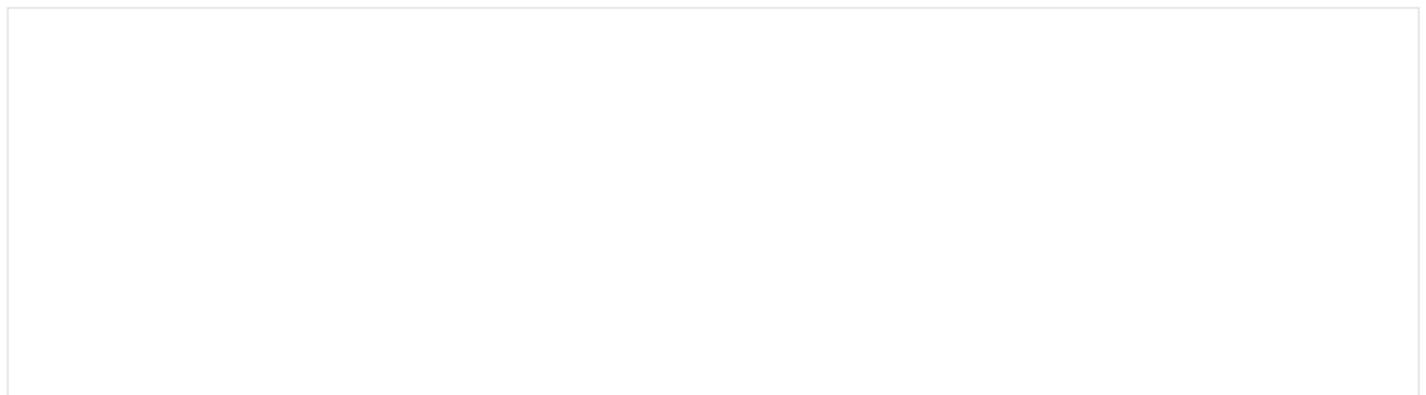
West Side resident Jamie Bryson, 59, brought two of her grandchildren to the event and said she was impressed with the turnout, despite some periods of rain.

“Other than that, it was really nice,” she said. “It was peaceful. ... the kids are enjoying it and I’m enjoying it.”



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