

# Backpack buddies: Area youth sending support to Louisiana flood victims

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**GODFREY** – Area youth who know a thing or two about the hardships of flooding are making connections with their peers in Louisiana and sending flood relief in the form of backpack care packages this month.

The initiative is in partnership with the newly-established Swarovski Waterschool USA Mississippi River, headquartered at Lewis and Clark Community College's National Great Rivers Research and Education Center. The project aims to empower Illinois students to make a positive impact on the lives of fellow students downriver, provide support for flood victims in Louisiana, and create a dialogue between the two, based on mutual experiences and understanding.

“I’m very sad about what happened, but everything will be okay,” wrote Jessica, a fifth grade student at Lincoln Middle School in East St. Louis, to her pen pal downriver. “I’m glad you are back in school and able to continue your education.... I hope this letter finds you in good spirits and it helps. I hope we can be life long pen pals. Maybe my story will help you know you’re not alone.”

Jessica, her classmates, and other fifth grade students at North Elementary School in Alton, Illini Middle School in Jerseyville, and Lovejoy Middle School in Brooklyn are sending these personalized letters of support, along with backpacks filled with care items, to students currently displaced by floodwaters in the Ascension Parish Public School District south of Baton Rouge. Each item, including soap, reusable paper towels, books, notebooks, pencils, small toys, and reusable sport bottles, correlate with each of the Swarovski Waterschool’s three pillars – access to safe water, water education and sanitation, hygiene and health.

“The Swarovski Waterschool backpacks are full of important items that students in Louisiana can put to immediate use, while the handwritten letters provide a personal connection,” L&C President Dale Chapman said.





Participating teachers at both ends of the project will also receive U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' One Mississippi curriculum guide, which contains lessons in science, history and culture pertaining to the Mississippi River, to help bring the project into perspective for the students.

On Oct. 26, Natalie Marioni, NGRREC<sup>SM</sup> Director of Environmental Education and Citizen Science, and Ethan Braasch, L&C Horticulture Manager, will deliver 106 backpacks to four fifth grade classes temporarily housed by the former campus of River Parishes Community College in Louisiana. The students will then have the opportunity to write back and participate in an ongoing dialogue with their pen pals at the Metro East schools.

“When visiting with our local schools as they assembled the backpacks, students reflected on how good it felt to help other students in need,” Marioni said. “Many students commented on situations that had deeply affected their own lives or those of loved ones and how letters such as those they were writing would have helped them feel less saddened by their circumstances. To be the ones to provide needed support, rather than being on the receiving end, our confluence area students learned the power of community and river stewardship.”

The newest Swarovski Waterschool at NGRREC<sup>SM</sup> is the first and only one of its kind in North America and the only one located on the Mississippi River, at the confluence of the Illinois, Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. The Swarovski Waterschool program, which has footholds situated along many great rivers of the world—the Danube (Austria), Ganges (India), Yangtze (China), Nile (Uganda), Amazon (Brazil) and now the Mississippi (United States)—educates children ages 8-15 and their communities about the ecological, economic, social and cultural issues that affect water use on a local and global level, and provides clean drinking water and sanitation in schools and communities across the globe.

Multiple partners up and down the Mississippi are sponsoring the backpack project through fiscal assistance, donated items, and logistical support, including Lewis and Clark Community College, the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center, Swarovski, Associated Professional Educators of Louisiana, Ascension Parish Public School District, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville STEM Center, Illinois American Water, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Cherry Lake Publishing.

To learn more about The Swarovski Waterschool, visit [http://www.swarovskigroup.com/S/aboutus/Swarovski\\_Waterschool.en.html](http://www.swarovskigroup.com/S/aboutus/Swarovski_Waterschool.en.html). Learn more about NGRREC at [www.ngrrec.org](http://www.ngrrec.org).