

Project Rebound returning to schools to help young oil spill victims

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By **Guy Busby** Press-Register



Project Rebound volunteers Bettie and Harry Clem talk to school children in 2005 following Hurricanes Ivan and Katrina. (File photo)

GULF SHORES, Alabama -- Project Rebound volunteers and counselors plan to return to Baldwin County schools in February to again help children deal with the effects of a disaster on the Gulf Coast.

In 2005 and 2006, staff members visited schools around Baldwin County to talk to children following Hurricanes Ivan and Katrina. Now, Project Rebound will be dealing with the effects of the oil spill, Bettie Clem, one of the volunteers, said.

"Children have been affected by this too," she said.

"They've seen the pictures. They worry about the fish and the animals and it's affected their home lives."

Children also feel the economic effects of the spill, Paige

Rucker, Project Rebound state director, said.

"You've got kids who are having parents who have either lost a job or economically been affected and a lot of stresses at home," Rucker said. "We're going to be talking and working with kids on how to deal with that."

Clem and her husband, Harry, were among the volunteers who visited Baldwin County schools after the hurricanes. Now, as then, workers had to find ways to adapt the lessons and programs to the age groups, Harry Clem said.

"We've got 17 pictures that are being downloaded for the presentation including pictures of the (oil rig) fire," he said.

"Some of those won't be used with the littler children."

Bettie Clem said children have to understand that people, old and young, have to take responsibility for their actions, but that messes can be resolved if people work together.

"Sometimes when we don't follow all the rules, things happen and we have to clean them up," she said.

The Clems said that as with the hurricane visits, volunteers will take care to be sure students are not disturbed by the lessons.

"We try to avoid anything scary," Bettie Clem said. "If a child is upset, they can leave and go do something else, but

overall, the children really enjoy it.”

She said children like having a chance to talk about their experiences, whether in a hurricane or other situation. The visits give the students an opportunity to tell adults and their classmates their feelings in the safe, familiar environment of their classroom.

The presentation for the children of all ages will include a cloth bag with items intended to help families deal with the spill.

Among the items is a coloring book, which is being prepared by Project Rebound volunteers, that includes descriptions of the spill and what has been done to clean up the Gulf.

The bags also include a small ball that looks like a beach ball and which can be squeezed to relieve stress. A pen and miniature foam life preserver have the name and telephone number for Project Rebound.

The students will also receive a small plastic spring on which is drawn a smiling face.

“We use that to show that sometimes we all get stressed and feel stretched out to our limit, but in time, if we relax, things come back to normal,” she said as she stretched and then eased the spring back to where the smiling face was visible.

Project Rebound is a program of the Baldwin County Department of Mental Health, Alabama Department of Mental Health and Alta Pointe Health Systems.

The program offers mental health counseling as well as assistance locating other services being offered by agencies such as Ecumenical Ministries, Catholic Social Services and Housing First, according to organizers.