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## Parents learn ways to keep children safe

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Special to The Herald

**MANATEE** - Zachary Bernhardt was only 7 years old when he vanished from his bed in the early morning hours on Sept. 11, 2000. He has never been found.

On Saturday, members of his family were at the Back-to-School Safety Fair at Two Rivers Business Park on State Road 64, trying to teach parents how to keep their children safe.

"If we can help one family, then we've done our job," said Billie-Jo Jimenez, Zachary's aunt, who was wearing a photo pin of the missing boy. "It can happen to anybody."

The Back-to-School Safety Fair, organized to educate families about child safety, was originally scheduled for Aug. 27, but was rescheduled because of Hurricane Katrina.

Safety fair organizer Sharri Cagle hoped the event would bring more awareness to parents and children about the dangers of sexual predators and give parents tips to protect their children against abduction.

"It really starts to hit home when you have children," said Cagle, a mother of three. "I would rather be able to do something now instead of wait for something to happen."

Hundreds of people flocked to the safety fair to ride ponies, eat cotton candy, get balloons, watch clowns and magic tricks and to check out fire engines and police cars.

There were food and games, but also lots of helpful safety tips on everything from avoiding an abduction to water and storm safety.

Donation jars on vendors' tables held monetary contributions to be used in helping find missing children and to educate people about sexual predators. Cagle said the money raised will be distributed to agencies like the Klaas Kids Foundation, the Jimmy Ryce Bloodhound Network, the Agency for Missing and Exploited Children, and Child Protection Education of America to pay for fingerprinting, photographing and DNA collection for children.

The Klaas Kids Foundation, a nonprofit organization started in 1994 and named after 12-year-old Polly Klaas, who was kidnapped and murdered, was doing digital fingerprinting, photographing and DNA sampling of children for parents. Brad Dennis, director of search operations for the foundation, was coordinating the fingerprinting effort.

Dennis had spent the previous two weeks searching for more than 2,000 missing children in Mississippi. Many of those children are in shelters because of Hurricane Katrina and are being reunited with parents with the help of agencies. But more than 4,000 sexual predators from Louisiana are also in the shelters, a problem many didn't foresee, he said.

Dennis is going back to Mississippi to help again on Monday.

"It has caught all of us offguard, the magnitude of this situation," Dennis said. "Now you have sexual predators roaming where the children are."

A book with more than 50 pages and hundreds of names and addresses of sexual offenders and sexual predators from 15 Manatee County zip codes was on display inside the Tenant's Verification Bureau where the fingerprinting was taking place. Cagle said it was important to provide parents with the information so they would know whether a registered offender lives in their neighborhood.

"Sometimes you get too comfortable," she said. "You think your kids are safe in their front yards, but they're not."

The safety fair provided a good opportunity for parents to sit down with their children and talk about preventing abduction, as well as other safety issues, Dennis said. Abduction and sexual predators are issues parents need to openly and honestly discuss with their children, he said.

"We just want to safeguard children," Dennis said.

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