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Co-workers drafted as helping hands

Serve-a-thon - More than 1,000 join Hands on Portland to spruce up schools, homes and bikes

Sunday, October 02, 2005

BETSY HAMMOND

On Saturday, 1,260 people who could have slept in or tended their own yards or watched college football didn't.

Instead, they volunteered -- painting school hallways, rehabbing donated bicycles, landscaping low-income housing, sorting donated food and clothing -- at sites in Portland, Vancouver, St. Helens, Beaverton, Tigard and Hillsboro.

That made it the largest "serve-a-thon" ever put on by Hands on Portland, a 9-year-old nonprofit that matches volunteers with convenient do-good opportunities. Its last serve-a-thon drew 1,000.

Overwhelmingly, participants in this year's half-day mass-volunteer event came because somebody at work asked them to.

Cable giant Comcast dominated the ranks of volunteers by propelling 800 of its account representatives, cable connectors, Internet fixers and executives to give their Saturday.

Workers said they were encouraged, not coerced, and were happy to pitch in.

"It feels good to go out and help the community," said Mike Pritchett, who works in Comcast's Beaverton Internet repair office.

He spent 3 1/2 hours spreading fresh cream-colored paint onto the walls of Hillsboro's Evergreen Junior High. If not for the call to volunteer, he said, "I would have slept in, rolled over and starting watching college football."

The workplace -- not the neighborhood, church, Scout troop or social group -- is where many people bond tightly enough to volunteer together, even when they're off company time, Pritchett and others said.

"I like the people I work with," he said. "I figured it would be fun. . . . It wasn't like going to a place where you didn't know anybody to try to help."

Weekdays, Cease Chapin and Linda Arnbrister toil over numbers together in the accounting department of Liberty Northwest insurance company. But Saturday, they brandished toothbrushes, rags, wrenches and cleaning solution making once-grimy children's bikes gleam. The bikes will be given to low-income youngsters.

As they polished a small fuchsia bike with white tires and purple handgrips, the pair said they were happy to answer the workplace call to volunteer. It feels great to make a difference, they said.

Portland's Portsmouth Middle School hadn't been repainted since 1985. The walls were a dull beige, the trim a rusty orange.

On Saturday, 138 volunteers descended, lured primarily by co-workers or friends at Marsh & McLellan, Mercer Human Resources Consulting, ESM Group or the University of Portland.

In four hours, an acre of hallways, stairwells and cafeteria went from dated and dull to bright buttery yellow and vivid green.

Students will learn better, feel more school pride and get the message that adults in the area care about them, volunteers and Portsmouth teachers said as they admired the transformation.

"This was inspiring," said teacher Brandi Streeter. "Monday morning, our students are going to be shocked and awed."

More information: www.handsonportland.org

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