



The Oregonian

Youths seize chances to help their community

Volunteering - Whether prodded by schools or parents, or on their own initiative, kids get active

Thursday, August 17, 2006

MICHELLE MANDEL
The Oregonian

Allison Lu loves to volunteer.

For five years, the Bethany teen has been doing good deeds in the community, from assembling kits for blood donations to baby-sitting for parents attending English as a second language classes.

Sure, Lu says, she could watch television or hang out like some of her friends. But the 18-year-old gets something from volunteering that surpasses sitting around.

"I don't think most young people who live in the suburbs understand the poverty and the hardship that some people have to deal with every day," says Lu, a volunteer this summer with Hands On Portland, a nonprofit organization that pairs needy causes with volunteers.

"It was a rude awakening when I went to my first soup kitchen," she says. "It definitely made me want to be a more active community member."

Such altruism appears to be spreading among young people, say volunteer organizers, especially when compared with earlier decades, when few teens 18 and younger volunteered.

Reasons for the interest varies. Some schools, such as Southridge High School in Beaverton, require students to put in volunteer hours. Some parents join their children, creating family moments that benefit the community.

The upshot: More children than ever are giving up free time to help others, says Andy Nelson, Hands On Portland's executive director.

"If you look at older generations, a lot of us had to learn to volunteer as adults," he says. "But the generation growing up today is able to experience getting involved at an early age."

Volunteer opportunities in the Portland area run the gamut from a one-day cleanup to a weekly commitment at a place such as Providence St. Vincent Medical Center. There, young people are asked to contribute 100 hours, typically four hours at a stretch, says Judy Martin, administrative assistant of the hospital's volunteer department.

This summer, 77 young people volunteer regularly, doing tasks throughout the hospital, she says.

At the Tigard Public Library, about 25 young people volunteer regularly, mostly reshelving children's books, says volunteer coordinator Trish Stormont. But volunteers who think shelving sounds like a "root canal" help with other activities, she says, such as presentations.

"We don't treat the kids any different than we do the adult volunteers," Stormont says. "That makes this place an excellent place to learn job skills."

Megan Myers of Tigard hopes good things come out of her summer stint at the library. Her parents prodded her to sign on, but now Myers, 15, enjoys shelving.

"I like helping the community," Myers says. "And it makes my parents happy too."

It's not only individuals who volunteer. Sometimes it's large groups, such as the YMCA of Columbia-Willamette in Portland. Recently youngsters in the summer program traveled to Wilsonville to help with the senior citizen meal program and to spruce up parks.

"It's really neat for us to have the kids, especially here at the senior center," says Patty Brescia, Wilsonville's seniors program manager. "The kids are getting a good lesson, learning how to be good stewards in the community. And the seniors just love having them around."

Some volunteers, Brescia says, are as young as 8. Nelson, of Hands on Portland, says he's seen children as young as 5, including his son, volunteering.

"I had my son be involved in a project called Love Letters, where people wrote best wishes cards to three children who were terminally ill.

"My son loved the experience," he says. "And, hopefully, that will inspire him to do it again."

Michelle Mandel: 503-294-5959; michellemandel@news.oregonian.com