

Hundreds of volunteers honor King with service

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Stephanie Yao/The Oregonian Pastor Frederick Woods (left) speaks with Jonathan Franks amid basketball at the Mallory Avenue Community Enrichment Center's gym. Volunteers will paint and tidy the center in the basement of Calvary Christian Church in Northeast Portland as part of a national day of service on Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

Since 1994, Martin Luther King Jr. Day has officially been a national day of service, and this year hundreds of Portlanders will give thousands of hours to more than 60 projects around the area.

"We made it a long weekend," said Andy Nelson, director of Hands On Greater Portland, which coordinates about half of the projects, "because not everybody has Monday, and so many people want to volunteer this year."

Portland is definitely a volunteering kind of town: According to volunteeringinamerica.gov, our volunteer rate of nearly 36 percent is third among large cities in the country. And Americans are turning out as rarely before on this Martin Luther King Jr. Day in answer to President-elect Barack Obama's call to national service, said Sandy Scott of the Corporation for National and Community Service. The federal agency administers AmeriCorps, Senior Corps and coordinates the national day of service.

"So far, we have 9,535 projects registered around the country," Scott said Thursday, "and more are coming in all the time. I think we're easily going to have more than 10,000 Martin Luther King (Jr.) Day projects when we're done, which is twice as many as we registered last year."

In the Portland area, volunteers will weatherize homes; frame a fourplex for Habitat for Humanity; cover hundreds of new books with protective slipcovers for the David Douglas School District; collect old musical instruments for the Ethos Music Center's programs for students; collect clothes for the homeless; help the Friends of Trees plant trees in the Lents and the Powellhurst Gilbert neighborhoods; disassemble bikes to be rebuilt for kids at the Community Cycling Center; clean up Oregon City's main street; work in community gardens and wetlands; remove invasive plants from parks; clean, paint and tidy group homes, shelters and public schools; help stock food banks; serve meals to the homeless; and much more.

Projects in Portland

The sheer number and variety of volunteer projects are impressive enough. Multiply that by the impact of each individual project, and you start to understand how Portlanders are honoring the ideals and work of King.

For Martha Decherd, the teacher-librarian at David Douglas High School, the volunteer project means hundreds of books will be distributed to school libraries this month instead of a year from now, when overworked librarians might have found the spare time to cover new paperbacks with protective laminates. "It means a lot to us," Decherd said, "and to our students."

For Pastor Frederick Woods, the 70 or so volunteers who'll paint and tidy the Mallory Avenue Community Enrichment Center are further proof that the community is taking ownership of the center on Northeast Alberta Street. Since 2005, Woods has worked to create a multi-use center for all in the basement of the sprawling old building that houses Woods' Calvary Christian Church. "Not everybody comes to church on Sunday," Woods said. "There are so many other ways we can involve the community."

During Monday morning and afternoon work parties at the MACE Center, volunteers will sort clothes, organize books and paint the kitchen, gym, classrooms and the stage, which will provide a performance space for the community's young musicians and playwrights.

"Financially, it's a blessing to us, because we receive no federal or city funds," he said.

The project is coordinated by Hands On Greater Portland and sponsored by the North Northeast Business Association, which also will sponsor the library that Woods plans to open in the center.

"That means a lot to me, because two years ago, I wasn't even sure the business association wanted us on the street," Woods said, "because we were feeding the homeless and helping people struggling with addiction or emerging from prison."

"But now they're helping our vision come to pass because they realize that we want to decrease violence and homelessness and educate our kids right."

For Woods, the volunteers are another of the center's blessings, which include its many small donors and the \$10,000 plumbing job done gratis by a local firm.

"We'll have our backs against the wall with the heat about to be shut off and, out of the blue, someone will write us a check," he said. "These volunteers honor Dr. King's vision of ordinary people coming together and working for the common good: He said everybody can be great because everybody can serve."

Big response to volunteer

Volunteer coordinating groups are gratified to see the response to Martin Luther King Jr. Day 2009.

"This is the only national day of service," said Nelson of Hands On Greater Portland. "People find it a great time to volunteer for the first time, and our job is to make that experience so positive that they make volunteering a way of life."

Martin Luther King Jr. Day Volunteer Projects

Hands On Greater Portland:

www.handsonportland.org, click on "Special Events" then click on "Read more" under MLK Day Celebration Through Service

National MLK Day Web site: mlkday.gov

Corporation for National and Community Service: www.nationalservice.org

Scott of the Corporation for National and Community Service doesn't have a projection yet for the total number of volunteers involved in this year's Martin Luther King Jr. Day projects, but he thinks it will break the million mark.

"The response is through the roof and off the charts," he said, "and it's incredibly exciting. The key will be to translate this momentum into long-term commitment, but it's clear that Americans are coming together and honoring Dr. King as never before."

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