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Volunteers flock to Day of Caring

BY BARBARA BLAKE • SEPTEMBER 4, 2009 07:42 AM

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ASHEVILLE — When a group of employees from Highland Farms Retirement Community volunteered to make and serve a huge brunch for terminally ill patients and their family members Thursday at the John F. Keever Solace Center, it was more than just a meal.

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"For (families) who are in a time of trauma and upheaval, for whom taking care of themselves is low on the priority list, to have that nurturing gesture of caring means the world," said Danny Johnson, volunteer services manager at the hospice center.

"This is truly a gift," he said, "a true gesture of compassion."

The gift of service was repeated by more than 1,400 volunteers at some 70 locations Thursday during Hands on Asheville-Buncombe's 18th annual Day of Caring to kick off the United Way's 2010 campaign.

Individual volunteers and employee groups from 57 local businesses spent the morning planting trees and pulling weeds, beautifying schools, sterilizing toys at day care centers, painting classrooms, stabilizing wetlands and otherwise improving lives and property throughout the community.

Thursday's volunteer marathon was a perfect fit for a new focus at the United Way. Rather than setting a monetary goal for this year's campaign, the organization will raise as much money as it can — hopefully surpassing last year's \$6 million target — while accelerating a call for more advocacy and volunteerism.

"Giving continues to be important; it takes money to bring about community change — we know that," campaign chairman Dr. Leon Elliston said at a kickoff rally. "But giving is a tool, a means to reach our goal, and we know dollars alone will not overcome the barriers we face in creating opportunities for everyone in education, income and health.

"It also takes advocating and volunteering, and that's why giving, advocating and volunteering are our three strategies for advancing the common good," Elliston said. "Do we want to raise more money than we did last year? You betcha. And we are going to go for it."

Volunteering was job one for a team from three Lowe's stores who were cleaning the garden, building sidewalks and laying pavers in the children's playground at the YWCA. The volunteers will return today to paint inside the facility.



Christ School students and staff volunteer their time planting bushes and trees in the median areas at the Buncombe County Sports Park in Enka. The project is part of the annual United Way Day of Caring. (Steve Dixon/sdixon@citizen-times.com)

TO GET INVOLVED

For more about the United Way campaign or volunteer opportunities, www.unitedwayabc.org, www.211wnc.org or www.handsonasheville.org.

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Lingering long past the noon ending time for Day of Caring, some of the Lowe's team didn't even want to stop for lunch. One of the volunteers, human resources manager Matt Cole, wiped sweat from his face with a dusty work glove.

“This is harder work than we do inside the (Lowe's) building,” he acknowledged. “But none of us have any qualms about what we're doing.”



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