

Passaic Valley Today

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Montclair State volunteers rekindling sense of community 9/11 engendered

Volunteers from Montclair State University will fan out across North Jersey this Saturday in honor of the Sept. 11 National Day of Service and Remembrance.

The initiatives, which will range from painting projects in Little Falls, to trail maintenance at Essex County's Hilltop Reservation, and street a cleaning effort in Bloomfield, will have the volunteers give of their time to complete 10 projects, eight of them off campus.

"I feel very positive about this program," said Beth Toussaint, volunteer resource center coordinator at Montclair State, who has organized transportation for the 300 students involved. "I spent a lot of time trying to connect with organizations that really need our assistance... and we chose a variety of projects - indoor projects and outdoor projects - that will draw a large number of volunteers."

At the Little Falls Recreation Center, the volunteers plan to refurbish an outdoor shed where the recreation department houses sporting equipment, Toussaint said.

John Pace, recreation director for Little Falls, said he appreciates any help that Montclair State can provide.

"I need somebody to just touch it up," he said of the shed, which he plans to have the students paint. After years of wear from the weather and balls hitting the shed, the structure is on its way to becoming an eyesore, Pace said.

At Little Falls School No. 1, they plan to paint doors, Toussaint said. Paint on the doors is getting chipped, the colors are fading, and painting them will make for bright entryways, she said.

"We wanted to partner with one of the schools in general because we thought painting in the schools is a really nice gesture," she said.

"The principal, he really wanted to come up with an attainable objective," Toussaint said. "He's a very practically minded man."

At Hilltop Reservation - a 280 square mile nature preserve, which spans the towns of Cedar Grove, Verona, and North Caldwell - the volunteers are partnering with the Hilltop Conservancy, a group that maintains the area.

"The conservancy is an interesting group in that they're all volunteer members and they get very little help in maintaining the reservation itself," she said.

The volunteers plan to help the conservancy in its ongoing efforts to restore of a meadow, where a large hospital building once stood.

"The project there (at the meadow) is to get rid of the invasive plant species and to get the deer out of the reservation," Toussaint said. To accomplish that goal they will be pulling weeds and extending a fence that keeps deer away from the native plants, she said.

The other part of the project will happen near the northern part of the reservation, which is off of Fairview Avenue in North Caldwell. They will "harden" the hiking and biking trails by placing boulders along them, she said.

"They find boulders, but ones you can actually carry, dig into an inch of dirt and basically bury these rocks," Toussaint said.

In Bloomfield, the students plan to clean streets in the area of the Watsessing Avenue Train Station, she said.

In Montclair, they plan to have students help them prepare Hillside Elementary School, which offers a gifted and talented program for grades three through five, for the upcoming school year, Toussaint said. Their plans include organizing the school's media center and the school's drama materials, she said.

They also plan to have volunteers weed and trim plants at the grounds of the Montclair Historical Society, which Toussaint said is a great educational resource that gets little help with such tasks.

"For each site we're providing a maximum of 35 to 40 volunteers," she said, adding, "We are hoping we can reach those numbers and they'll be awesome projects."

Although the volunteers will spend their time painting, pulling weeds, and sorting through school play costumes, the day's real purpose transcends the short term goals of the work projects.

The National Day of Service puts a positive spin on the tragic events of Sept. 11, Little Falls' Arnold Korotkin, founder of the 9/11 List-serv (tinyurl.com/911-List-serv) a email service that distributes information about and related to the terrorist attacks, said in a video interview with NJ News Commons director Debbie Galant.

"It enables us in a positive way never to forget that we're doing something that is in commemoration of the people who lost their lives - the innocent victims who died on 9/11," he said.

In a phone conversation with Passaic Valley Today, he emphasized the sense of unity that the National Day of Service helps to engender.

"It has rekindled a sense of community," he said, noting that residents from the area communities also volunteer with the students and staff. "If one remembers 9/11 and the days immediately after, one remembers a sense of community and caring, and the National Day of Service follows that path."

For more on the projects and specifics about that day, visit www.montclair.edu/day-of-service.

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