

'Help our neighbors ... love our neighbors'

More than 350 students on mission trip repair homes in western Stark County

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Massillon resident John Tough ruffled the ears of his 9-year-old yellow lab.

He looked up at the clear blue sky late Wednesday morning, enjoying some sunshine after last week's rain. Tough was also enjoying his newly replaced front steps, his dog sprawled on the porch beside him.

Over the last 10 years, his front steps had been deteriorating. Gone were the creaky stairs with the bottom step falling apart.

A group of high school students replaced his steps as part of Reach Mission Trips, also known as Reach Workcamps. The week-long camp focuses on service as middle and high school students do painting, construction and other repairs at the homes of low-income or disabled residents.

Established in 1992, the Colorado-based ministry brings kids from churches of all denominations around the country to do service work in various communities.

More than 350 students and adult leaders from eight states were staying at Tuslaw High School for the week. At least 40 of those student volunteers were Stark County residents.

First time in Stark

The Rev. Matt Ellington, of Stanwood Community Church in Tuscarawas Township, said the church has had a relationship with Reach Workcamps for nearly 20 years.

The organization sends volunteers to several locations in the U.S. every year based on community need. Mission workers were in the New Philadelphia area at least 15 years ago. However, Ellington said, the camps have never been to Stark County.

Groups of eight to 10 teens worked on more than 30 houses in Canal Fulton, Massillon, Lawrence and Tuscarawas townships and Navarre.

The students made repairs at the homes during the day and attend services in the evenings.

Ellington served as the leader of the services during this year's camp.

Devotionals were held at 7:30 a.m. with an evening service at 7 p.m., he said.

"This is a work camp," he explained. "For the young men and women, we want to get them out and helping in the community. We also want to work on their hearts."

Reach Workcamps received more than 70 applicants from the area, Ellington said. Though 31 houses were on the list to have repairs done, the groups would likely get up to 40 homes completed if some work is finished earlier than anticipated, he said.

Kenneth Messinger, a camp group leader, has participated in Reach Workcamps for 16 years. He first attended the camp in his hometown in Pennsylvania at the age of 13.

Messinger said he has been "hooked ever since" and only missed one year due to conflicts with a sports schedule.

Now as an adult, he serves as a mentor to the youth involved and enjoys making a difference in communities around the country.

"I might not know them, but God teaches us to help our neighbors and love our neighbors," Messinger said. "Even though they're not directly next door, it's great just to get out and travel and help the people that need it."

'Showing God's love'

Two crews were working to prime and paint an 1826 home on Stanwood Street SW in Tuscarawas Township this week.

Molly Waybrant, of Pennsylvania, held a ladder steady as a fellow volunteer applied primer to the top portion of a two-story home.

The 15-year-old has attended the camp for five years. Having an opportunity to travel and make new friends keeps her coming back each year, she said. Seeing how other churches work is also another draw to the camps.

Kaden Lau, a Tuslaw High School Student, swiped a paint brush along the roof of the porch, coating it with primer.

"It's about showing God's love through service," the 16-year-old said. "Working with other kids and the Reach staff makes it a lot of fun."

The crews were painting Dawn Houmard's home. Houmard said she hasn't been able to paint the house in nearly 20 years due to medical issues. Four generations have lived in the home as her daughter, Aryn Houmard, raises her children there.

Two-year-old Quinn Houmard had taken to one of the volunteers and was using a paintbrush with the help of Kentucky native Abby Rogers.

"It's almost like family coming in the morning," Aryn Houmard said. "This organization really gets involved. They're not just going and doing the work. It's an incredible program."

Carrie Hershberger, of Dundee, was an adult leader of a group repairing a home on Cherry Road NE. The group painted inside, built a small porch and replaced the back steps.

When youth groups arrive, they are split up into different crews with students from other areas.

Attending the camp gives members of her church — Fairlawn Mennonite in Apple Creek — an opportunity to learn how other denominations worship.

Hershberger attended the camp for the first time this year, and many members of the youth group want to participate in future camps.

"Missions aren't always about traveling far away," Hershberger said. "Many of the kids want to do it again. The cross-denominations has been good in worship and learning different things. We all love Jesus, and that's the main thing."



