NEA Volunteers Give Louisiana High School Extreme Makeover

June 29, 2010 by Cynthia McCabe

By Amanda Litvinov

Outreach to Teach, NEA's annual school repair project, is always a meaningful affair. But there was something singularly special about this year's effort to repair and beautify Belle Chasse High School, in Belle Chasse, Louisiana, one of the many communities outside of New Orleans forever changed in 2005 by Hurricane Katrina. "It really hits home to bring this kind of support here," says Brandan Trahan, a junior at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette, and student leader of the Louisiana Association of Educators.

Belle Chasse sits at the northernmost point of the long, narrow Plaquemines Parish, whose southern stretch caught the worst of Katrina. And then the levees failed. Amidst the civic breakdown that ensued, Belle Chasse High School opened its doors wide, housing the displaced in the immediate aftermath and eventually absorbing four other parish high schools lost to the storm.

"NEA has come together to do something truly big to help a community still in recovery," says Trahan.

In this case, something big was the sum total of hundreds of important tasks—a hard day's work by more than 400 NEA Student and Retired members, plus Belle Chasse faculty. It was scraping peeling paint from hundreds of surfaces. It was sanding rust spots on exposed metal pipes. It was painting (and painting and painting), and carefully taping windows and walls so trim could be touched up. It was replacing rickety courtyard benches with new, sturdy ones. It was using choice walls and every bulletin board as a chance to inspire students with the school emblem or a quotation like this one: Know your history; make your future.

With temperatures surging well into the 90's, it was the heartiest souls (or perhaps those who woke up late on job sign-up day) who took on the outdoor projects—like prepping the courtyards for sod by clearing out old vegetation and raking dirt.

"If we're going to be here, we might as well do some real work," said Ashley Salter of the University of Alabama. She was part of a small crew struggling with a stubborn root, and was duly impressed when Retired member John Frederick stepped in to hack it out by pounding a machete with a rubber mallet.

"Wherever you go, you have to improvise," said the Flint, Mich., resident who holds 32 years' experience teaching math and zero years' experience landscaping.

In a nearby hallway, a group of students was painting these words: Some succeed because they are destined to, but most succeed because they are determined to.

"It's inspiring to see how the Students can pull the NEA family together for a major service project like this," says Colleen Heinz, an Active member and vice president of the Colorado Education Association who served as NEA Student Program chair from 1986-88.

Current Student Program Chair and future educator Jermaine Coleman says service projects are a key part of the next generation's idea of educating. "It's not enough for us to only be in the classrooms," he says. "We also want to be part of the community."

"They are our future leaders," says Heinz, gesturing toward the hundreds of students laboring around her. "If they can do this, just think what else they can do."

Even as she spoke, a student's careful brushstrokes filled in the letters that make up Gandhi's most famous words of wisdom: We must be the change we wish to see in the world.

For the first time in the history of Outreach to Teach, now in its 15th year, local design firms were engaged for special redesign efforts to create inviting, restful spaces for students and staff alike. HMS Architects designed the complete refurbishment of the school's two staff lounges, which now sport chic decor and modern amenities. The library makeover, planned by Sizeler, Thompson, Brown Architects, includes fresh paint, new tables, chairs, and rugs, plus a cozy lounge area.

Outside, new stadium seating will accommodate larger groups thanks to Green Parrot Nursery and Garden center, which also provided sod, rubber mulch, and ten citrus trees.

"Every day the students of this school will see these changes and know someone out there believes in them," says NEA Retired President Barbara Matteson.

The front office was the site of another important transformation. The walls went from cherry bomb red—it must have seemed like a good idea at the time, that being one of the school colors and all—to a soothing pale green, much more conducive to calm, productive encounters with Principal and NEA member Leeland Lee.
But also important was properly painting the spaces outside—the parking spaces, that is.

"You might think it's just lines in a parking lot—how will that make a difference?" says Ja'Quincey Ponder, who also participates in local Outreach to Teach events back home in Alabama. "But words cannot explain how much it means to the educators and kids that someone came to fix up their school."

Does he expect to be out here as an NEA-Retired member someday? "That is the goal," says the 23-year-old Ponder. "Just let me get my career started first."

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