

# Community gets boost from Tanager Volunteer Day

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While there weren't any classes in session Tuesday, the students at Vermillion High School managed to stay busy.

That's because it was the fifth annual Tanager Volunteer Day, which found the students taking part in a number of projects around the community – everything from painting houses and washing windows to sorting papers and working in classrooms.

"You name it, we're doing it," said Lenni Billberg, high school social studies teacher who also serves as one of the event's coordinators. "We've been doing it five years now, and it's really grown. Each year we send about 500 kids out, and we've had nothing but positive results in our community."

The students are broken up into groups of 12-17 – which are overseen by teacher advisors – and sent to various organizations or individuals in the community who need assistance.

Joanne Ustad, career program coordinator for the school district, said the students completed "50 or 60 projects" this year.

Throughout the summer, Billberg contacts organizations who might be interested, while Ustad oversees individual contacts.

"Once the organizations have us, it spreads from there," Billberg said. "We have the senior center that

we help every year, but this year we had a sign-up list for seniors who need assistance at their homes. I think we have 35 senior citizens that we're helping in the community this year."

Freshmen Sowmya Ragothaman and Kylee Retzlaff were among those who assisted some of these senior citizens, spending the morning washing windows, carrying boxes, cleaning and weeding.

Both girls said they liked the couple whose home they visited.

"She was a really nice lady and she liked to talk," Retzlaff said. "It was fun."

Ragothaman agreed, adding, "She was sweet."

Before the girls and their group left, the husband insisted they each take a handcarved bowl he had made, somewhere between eight and 12 in all.

"He just laid them out ... and we all took one," Ragothaman said.

Among the groups and organizations the students did projects for Tuesday were Bluff View Cemetery, the United Church of Christ, the Vermillion Arts Council and the local schools.

"Absolutely everybody loves us," Billberg said. "Sometimes the community is afraid of the younger generation because (they want to know) they'll be responsible. But in reality, these kids are happy to be outside the classroom. They have a free day to do some fun stuff."

"It's not always fun to weed and paint, but you're



Vermillion High School students put a new coat of paint on the fence at the Clay County Rodeo Grounds as part of Tuesday's fifth annual Tanager Volunteer Day. (Photo by Travis Gulbrandson)

with your friends, so you make it a game," she said. "It works out really well."

Ragothaman and Retzlaff thought so, too. "The Tanager Volunteer Day is a really good idea, especially on this type of day," Ragothaman said.

"The weather is nice, it's a great day," Retzlaff added. "I like seeing everybody help."

Ustad said this is her favorite aspect, as well. "I hope that they see the reward of volunteering," she said.

Billberg said it's clear that they have. After the second year of the event, a

group of students came together to form a city-wide clean-up day to take place after D-Days.

VHS senior Chris Lubbers has taken part in the volunteer day all four years of his high school career.

"It was kind of weird at first, because we didn't really know what we were doing, but it's usually pretty fun," he said. "You learn a lot more about the community, especially the elderly people. You meet lots of new people, and it's a good experience to help other people."

Lubber said the day also

encourages students to take an active role in their community outside of the school.

"It helps to start out volunteering," he said. "Most people don't have the opportunity to start unless they do this kind of thing first. Once you realize it's not that hard, it's not that big of a deal."

Billberg said that while the work itself is hard, the students love it in the long

run. "If you go to graduation at the end of the year, every single speech by the students says, 'I learned how to be a volunteer. I learned how to help out my community.'"

"That's how you know it was really fermented in them," she said.



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