

Teens spring into action

Students use break from school to volunteer

BY DOUGLAS CROWL • LOVELAND CONNECTION • MARCH 17, 2009

The Thompson Valley High School student said it was quite the contrary.

"I made sure to keep the day open," she said as she prepared to stain a fence at Sister Mary Alice Murphy Center for Hope.

Slack, 16, joined about two dozen Northern Colorado teens Monday participating in the United Way of Larimer County's "Alternative Spring Break, Youth Responding to Poverty."

The teens split into groups, half working at the Center of Hope and half working at the Food Bank for Larimer County.

The students spent the rest of the day learning about local poverty issues, including participating in a poverty simulation exercise.

They also set up information tables at Old Town Square in Fort Collins to talk to the public about the issue.

"The point isn't that they spend 12 hours then they go home and they're done," said Julie Phillips, volunteer specialist for the United Way managing Monday's activities.

Instead, she said they aim to educate the teens about how to continue addressing poverty and homelessness in the region.

"Poverty is a significant issue in the community and it's a focus for the United Way," Phillips said.

The three-year average for the number of people living at less than the poverty line in Larimer County is 34,176, which is a 51 percent increase from seven years ago, according to data released by American Communities Survey in October 2007.

"I really didn't realize all the statistics were so high locally," Poudre High School student Melanie Snyder said.

The 17-year-old said helping in the community is important to her.

"I want to know what I can do on my own to help out," Snyder said.

Pamela Tia, 17, from Loveland High School, packed boxes of Triscuits into a large storage box at the Food Bank for Larimer County for her volunteer project.

"I see people on the street and it makes me feel pity," Tia said of poverty in the community.

She would like to become a doctor and, some day, help people in Africa.

"This is a good start," she said of volunteering locally to obtain her goal.

Despite the day's hard work and learning, the event also was aimed at having fun and meeting new people, Phillips said.

"Just enjoy the day, have a good attitude and be ready to jump in," she said.



Mercedes Slack, 16, from Thompson Valley High School, bags bread at the Food Bank for Larimer County on Monday. Slack and other students from Loveland and Fort Collins spent a day of their spring break giving back to the community as part of United Way's "Alternative Spring Break" program. (Travis A. Heuser/For Loveland Connection)