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Modesto service project joined by efforts in Ceres, Escalon, Riverbank

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MODESTO --]

You've probably seen several "LoveModesto" signs around town and perhaps wondered what it's all about: A new jewelry store coming to town? A late Valentine's Day project? A retro wave of the hippies' love philosophy?

Nope.

It's a collection of service projects — everything from cleaning up weeds to sprucing up schools to delivering cookies to firefighters — that will put more than 1,000 volunteers to work on April 2. While geared toward getting church members out of the pews and into their community, anyone can join in the twice-yearly work projects.

The program started in 2009, the brainchild of Jeff Pishney, reach pastor at Big Valley Grace Community Church. This year, Modesto will be joined by similar efforts in Ceres, Escalon and Riverbank.

"The first one started out as advertising to our church — "Let's get out of our church and help our community," Pishney said. "Then the vision started to enlarge. It's not just about us, our church."

Luis Palau, an Argentina-born evangelist who recently spoke at Big Valley, has a similar mind-set, Pishney said.

"It's not just proclaiming Jesus' message," he said. "Now (Palau) goes into communities before and after his message and does the projects. He says when Jesus comes to town, things should come together. It's powerful.

"With LoveModesto, we don't do the preaching component, but we do rally together to transform communities. It's a beautiful thing when the faith community and those in government, business, schools and nonprofits can come together."

The first LoveModesto event had eight projects. This year, there are 36 in Modesto and several in the other communities. Some of the Modesto projects include working with community gardens, spraying over graffiti and cleaning up alleyways. Volunteers also will donate blood, give haircuts at Modesto Gospel Mission, work with World Relief to welcome new refugees, oversee sports clinics at The Salvation Army's Red Shield Center and deliver pastries and hot drinks to area parks.

Grant Allard, a 21-year-old who is attending college in Chicago, participated last year.

"A friend had mentioned it to me," he said in a phone interview. "He was going to do it and wondered if I would be interested."

Allard and his buddy spent the day with a 28-year-old man named Frans, who had emigrated from Iraq just 10 days earlier to live with an aunt and uncle. Allard said they took him to Modesto Junior College and to the downtown farmers market. They also played soccer and football with him, before watching the World Cup soccer game with the United States pitted against Ghana.



(BART AH YOU/bahyou@modbee.com) LoveModesto coordinator Jeff Pishney and "Big Red" promote April 7th as the big date for community service throughout the community. March 15, 2011 - Modesto Bee - Bart Ah You

"We lost, but it was still really fun," Allard said. "Even though it was kind of tough to talk to him because of the language barrier, we could still communicate."

Allard, who has volunteered on other unrelated work projects, said he enjoyed his day with LoveModesto.

"There were a lot of churches there and just unity in Christ," he said. "We were like the hands and feet of Christ and not arguing over things in the Bible. I would do it again."

Karin Weller, a 49-year-old Turlock resident, worked at Dodge Ridge last year, helping mostly autistic children learn to ski in a LoveModesto project organized by the Society for the Handicapped. She enjoyed it so much, she has continued to volunteer with the organization for bike and water ski events.

"It means so much to me," she said. "Mostly I've worked with autistic children, and they've taken a piece of my heart. It makes me want to volunteer more. Now that my three daughters are grown, it's a good time for me to do that."

Valerie McCall, 42, and her family became LoveModesto volunteers last year, baking cookies and delivering them to the downtown fire station with a couple of other families.

"We made regular chocolate chip cookies and chocolate chocolate chip cookies," she said. "We handed the cookies to the firefighters and thanked them for their service to our city. We wanted to let them know we appreciated them."

The firefighters gave the group of about 12 a tour of the station, which includes an old-fashioned fire pole, a boat for rescue work on area rivers and lakes, the firetrucks, etc., all of it especially exciting for children.

"I just talked to the kids yesterday morning and looked on the Web site to see what we're going to do this year," she said. "I think it's a great thing. I can have all the knowledge and learn everything about God's word, but if I'm not living it, it's not worth a lot. Some see Christians in general like we're not loving, that we're too judgemental. This is so not that way. Its purpose isn't to preach at you; it's just putting your faith into action and practicing what you preach."

To find out more about LoveModesto projects, visit www.LoveModesto.com. The deadline to sign up to volunteer is March 27.

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