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Modesto, other cities Feeling the 'Love'

By Nan Austin

naustin@modbee.com

and Erin Tracy

etracy@modbee.com naustin@modbee.com etracy@modbee.com

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MODESTO --]

It didn't take a sunny day to generate warm feelings Saturday as thousands pitched in to assist others in Modesto, Ceres, Riverbank and Escalon.

Under an overcast sky, an estimated 4,000 volunteers put a little heart and a lot of muscle into helping people and improving places.

"I love it, absolutely," Equilla Carazo said as she handed out Love Modesto pamphlets downtown before heading out to pull weeds at Rumble and Sisk roads.

"It's a celebration of coming together. You know, you get up on a Saturday morning and you have a purpose in life. Isn't that wonderful?" Carazo asked with an ear-to-ear smile.

Love Modesto sent more than 2,500 volunteers to pick up trash by the transportation center, plant flowers and trees at elementary schools, spend time helping seniors, paint over graffiti at parks and a host of other projects.

Stepping up to help

About 500 volunteers attended the first Love Ceres event, beautifying parks, collecting toys and food for foster children, and spending time with elderly and disabled residents.

"If people don't step up and help the community, then we won't have a community," said Debbie Brasher as she painted benches in Smyrna Park.

Love Escalon volunteers canvassed neighborhoods collecting food for the CARE Food Pantry while a crew cleaned the facility and assembled new stainless steel tables. Others visited seniors or delivered cookies to the post office, police and firefighters, animal shelter helpers and ambulance drivers.

In Riverbank, coordinator Eric Bjerke said about 125 to 150 volunteers joined in the first Love Riverbank event. "We had a lot of people from all around the city," Bjerke said.

Helpers worked to create a community garden across from Crossroads Elementary. Others gathered food for a food bank. Three dozen or so more folks helped clear weeds and plant flowers downtown. Jacob Myers Park also got new plantings.

Riverbank seniors got visits from volunteers, many with children in tow, to hear their stories, share some smiles and give out carnations.

"Encourage" events for seniors, teachers and students were part of the community building of every "Love" happening, as were can and toy drives for food banks and foster kids.



(BART AH YOU/bahyou@modbee.com) LoveModesto coordinator Jeff Pishney on stage at 10th and I Streets with approximately 2,500 participants ready to go throughout Modesto, helping with community service projects. Saturday morning, April 2, 2011 - Modesto Bee - Bart Ah You

Love Modesto organizer Jeff Pishney said the day was about coming together as communities. He encouraged volunteers to make friends and continue to work with nonprofit agencies throughout the year.

"This is the point. ... This is for more than a day. Love Modesto is really a way of life," Pishney told a kickoff crowd.

At Robertson Road Elementary, teachers Martha Bañuelos and Joyce Moe helped plant flowers.

"It really freshens things up. ... I think everybody appreciates having a little color. It brings happiness," Moe said.

Steve Figgins said he signed up with sons Matthew, 15, Curtis, 12, and Connor, 7, to do something together, and so the boys would learn about helping others. Head custodian Juan Gonzalez volunteered with the Figgins family, planting 10 redwood trees across the back of the school's grassy field.

The school desperately needed more shade for hot days, office worker Alma Arreygue said, pointing to the play area. "I always see kids trying to huddle along that one tree," she said.

The school put on a pancake breakfast for about 60 Robertson Road and Lakewood Elementary students who teamed up to paint over graffiti at nearby Mellis Park.

Destiny Alvarez, watching her son and a friend paint a picnic table, said the eating areas had gang messages and profanity, and they found marijuana butts while cleaning up.

"The kids are having a great time," Alvarez said. "In case they see their peers tagging, they can say, 'Hey. I painted that. Have respect.' "

Student councils' choice

Robertson Road Principal Gregg Elliott said the two schools' student councils voted for the community service project.

Lakewood students Courtney Gregerson, 11, and Leia Johnson, 10, said they were glad to help out kids from another school.

"We wanted them to know that we care that they have graffiti in their parks," Courtney said.

At Coleman F. Brown Elementary in north Modesto, Principal Mitch Wood said having volunteers clean all the windows and other chores "helped us tremendously."

Ceres Fire Chief Brian Nicholes said volunteering helps people take ownership of their community.

With only four code enforcement workers in Ceres, budget cuts have taken a toll on parks. Volunteers cut overgrown brush, pulled weeds in flower gardens and painted over unsightly graffiti.

Ceres Assistant Superintendent Jay Simmonds used a weed-whacker around the memorial for fallen Ceres police Sgt. Howard Stevenson. He said many students signed up Saturday, but he hopes to recruit more for the next Love Ceres on June 25.

Boy Scout Troop 9 helped clean Howie's Grove along the Tuolumne River.

"People like to come down here and look at the view," said 14-year-old Scout Jar- red Halverson. "Right now, it doesn't look so pretty so we need to clean it up."

Bee staff writer Erin Tracy can be reached at etracy@modbee.com or 578-2366.

Bee education reporter Nan Austin can be reached at naustin@modbee.com or 578-2339.

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Phone: (209) 578-2000.