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Buffalo AmeriCorps members Joshua Blassingame, left, and his brother, Robin, work on a handicap ramp at the Willie Carty and N. Massy Healthy Home Education and Research Building on Monday. Sharon Cantillon / Buffalo News

'What Dr. King is all about'

Two sites turn into Buffalo epicenters for Day of Service

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A brown and yellow Southampton Street house and an East Side charter school Monday became two of Buffalo's epicenters for the Martin Luther King Jr. national Day of Service.

Snow shovels, hammers and paintbrushes served as some of the tools for nearly 300 people doing service projects aimed at helping a number of area organizations.

"It's important because it represents what Dr. King is all about," said Lois L. Johnson, chairwoman of the King Center Charter School.

The Genesee Street school served as the gathering point for what organizers said was about 250 individuals, including members of Western New York AmeriCorps.

Along with students and other volunteers, they tackled a number of projects, including building picnic tables for Roswell Park Cancer Institute, constructing birdhouses for Grassroots Gardens of Buffalo and delivering food for Meals on Wheels.

Jonathan Roland came to volunteer with his 10-year-old daughter, Tanisha, who is a fifth-grader at King Center Charter School.

"It was important to be here," Roland said as he covered the birdhouse he put together with red paint.

Tanisha Roland said it was important to show up at her school, even though it was a day off because of the federal holiday, in order "to help out."

The Service Collaborative of Western New York, the umbrella organization for six national service programs, including five through AmeriCorps, coordinated Monday's activity at the King Center Charter School.

Other service activities included educational outreach about fire prevention for the American Red Cross, assisting Habitat for Humanity and Project Naomi, as well as painting in the school, said Adam M. Bartoszek, manager of the Service Collaborative's Regional Volunteer Center.

The King Center Charter School got a new coat of paint in a couple of its hallways, while its basement floor was home for the picnic table and birdhouse projects.

Each school day, students pass a bust of King on their way to the first floor. The bust sits atop a stack of books that served as inspiration for the civil rights leader, said Keith W. Frome, headmaster of the middle school.

The students also have a daily meeting where school leaders affirm the school's values: getting each student to college, developing grit and contributing to King's dream of a peaceful world.

All students recently wrote down what their dreams were, and the slips of paper were put into a "Dream Box," Frome said. Each day, one of the pieces of paper is read aloud, with the school and its students pledging to make that dream come true. "It's a guiding spirit, not just in name only, but in activity" at the school, Frome said of King's legacy.

At 276 Southampton, near Jefferson Avenue, members of Buffalo AmeriCorps, the Young Heroes program and volunteers from Starbucks were helping another organization's dream come true.

The None Like You/We Care Outreach Program has been wanting to turn the home into a community and learning center, in memory of two board members who had developed the idea.

The Willie Canty and N. Massy Healthy Home Educational and Research Building will give individuals a place to learn about how to have and take care of a healthy home, said Elizabeth Triggs, a board member with None Like You/We Care.

Inside, there will be a greenhouse, which will teach people about community gardening and nutrition, as well as a library for workshops on everything from lead abatement to rodent removal, Triggs said.

At 11 a.m., about a dozen people were shoveling snow from the sidewalks on the block surrounding the home, a move to keep a clear path to a nearby food pantry.

Being able to bring food to those in need is another way to strive to bring King's dream of equal rights to life.

"He fought for freedom," Triggs said of King.

Victoria Johns and Tomaine Jordan were two of the Buffalo AmeriCorps members clearing snow from the sidewalks on Southampton.

Johns said it was important for people to serve their community, noting that it's something she likes doing.

For Jordan, it's also a sign of appreciation for the work King did for this country.

"It's a great day to be doing this," he said.

King's struggle also was honored at the Episcopal Diocesan Center of Western New York, where about two dozen children gathered Monday afternoon to watch a documentary about the civil rights movement.

"There were many blacks who went to jail in small towns in Georgia, never to be heard from again, and we have reason to believe they were lynched," said one civil rights leader.

That message was fresh in the minds of pastors who heard King speak and of children just learning about the movement.

"It's very powerful. It's like it happened an hour ago," said Wayne A. Blassingame, president of the local chapter of the Union of Black Episcopalians.

Blassingame joined with Episcopal leaders black and white in singing "We Shall Overcome," the civil rights anthem in the 1960s.

"On the large scale of the Diocese of Western New York, why aren't there more blacks that have a voice?" Blassingame asked.

Later, he helped pose questions to children from churches throughout Erie and Niagara counties.

"It's not like they're a different species -- they're still humans," said one fifth-grader. "So why should one human have a better life?"

That question was raised during the younger years of the Rev. R. William Franklin, the diocese's bishop who grew up in the South when King was prominent.

"I was at the University of Mississippi when it was integrated, and I smelled the tear gas and saw the federal troops," the bishop said. "What I think our mission in Western New York should be -- we are Christians who are on the side of human freedom. And we are also on the side of action where there is injustice."

News Staff Reporter Charlie Specht contributed to this report.

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