

THE VALLEY

Helping hands for Habitat



ERICA HILLIARD/FOR THE VALLEY NEWS DISPATCH

Cassidy Qualls, 15, of Galion, Ohio, lends a hand while working on a new house for Habitat for Humanity with her friend Lauren Cortelletti, 16, of Ontario, Ohio. The girls are among eight teenagers from Ohio who are assisting with construction of two houses in Natrona in Harrison.

Ohio teens pitch in to help build Natrona houses

HARRISON

BY TOM YERACE
VALLEY NEWS DISPATCH

Pounding nails in a house being built for a stranger in 80-degree temperatures may not be a typical teenager's idea of how to spend a summer day.

But that's the case for eight Ohio teens who are visiting the Alle-Kiski Valley as part of a church mission to work on two houses in Natrona for Habitat for Humanity Allegheny Valley.

"They get a lot of work done, which is what we need," said Diane Belitskus, executive director of the local affiliate for Habitat, an organization that builds affordable housing for low- and middle-income people. The homeowner is required to help others build their house.

Belitskus noted the Ohio teens were moving dirt and installing glass block windows in the sweltering heat.

"That's what is so phenomenal about young people that they would be willing to give up their time," she said.

But the eight teens who make up the mission from the First Lutheran Church of Galion, Ohio, don't seem to be letting hot weather and hard work keep them from having a good time.

"It's a lot of fun," said Lauren Cortelletti, 16, who is on her third trip to the Valley. "It's only for five days, and we get to go to Pittsburgh one day.

"I told them we should go to Hawaii or someplace but they won't listen to me," she quipped.

"It's been really fun," said Kendra Kocher, 15. "It's fun working with people you know from church, and we met new people. It's a good experience, helping people."

The group is being housed at the Bull Creek Presbyterian Church and have use of the Allegheny Valley YMCA to take showers.

Habitat provides lunch for the group, which includes the church pastor, the Rev. Matt Wheeler, and John Renock, a Valley native whose family moved to Ohio in 1959.

Each night they are guests at local churches, whose members serve them dinner through an arrangement organized by Habitat.

"There's really a lot of people involved when these groups come in," Belitskus said. "We'll call and ask (local residents) if they can help and they say 'Sure.' That's what is great about our area."

That willingness to help resulted in an added treat for the group at the end

Ohio teens help build houses

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of the workday Tuesday. Officials at Sylvan Park pool in Natrona Heights invited the group for an evening of swimming.

The hospitality is something Ben Longstreph, 16, one of the more outspoken members of the group, noticed.

"Everybody is like, so nice," he said.

Galion is about 60 miles from Columbus. It's the fifth year in a row that the church sent a group of teen volunteers to help the local Habitat chapter, Belitskus said.

The two groups connected through Renock.

"I've been involved with Habitat for about 20 years," Renock said. There was one year where the place we had been going to couldn't accommodate us, so I called New Ken and talked to

Diane. I have always had a soft spot for the New Ken area because I grew up here."

Renock said his connection to the area isn't the only reason why the church continues to send groups each year.

"With all the involvement I have had with Habitat affiliates, New Kensington is one of the finest," Renock said. "A lot of work gets done, and the volunteers are treated really well."

Renock also serves as an unofficial tour guide and goodwill ambassador. After a half day of work on Wednesday, he took the group on a 10-hour tour of the city and its attractions, such as the incline to Mount Washington, the Sen. John Heinz History Center and the Carnegie Science Center.

"We always start at Primanti's Restaurant," he said.

Besides the fun of being away

from home, touring a new city and helping someone less fortunate, Lauren Cortelletti said she has learned construction skills in her three Habitat trips to the Valley.

The first year, she learned how to install drywall; last year, it was landscaping and this year it was how to install hurricane clips (braces that hold the roof in place), and using handsaws to make door frames.

But Wheeler sees something even more worthwhile that the teens take back home.

"They learn how to practice compassion," he said.

Raising his hand flat above his head, Wheeler added, "So often we think of compassion as being up here, not something you do with your hands."

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