

Day of Caring a success in Centre County

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STATE COLLEGE — Kevin Kassab normally dislikes painting, but he was willing to make the effort Thursday to help his community.

So there he was, washing the scuffed and worn light blue walls of a two-bedroom unit at Centre House, the emergency homeless shelter on Nittany Avenue operated by Housing Transitions.



Kassab, a supervisor in the State College Borough's Division of Health and Neighborhood Services, was among seven volunteers spackling and painting the rooms for their part in the Centre County United Way Day of Caring.

He and three other workers from the borough government were joined by a trio from M&T Bank.

"I'm a longtime resident," Kassab said, a wet rag in hand. "I've been with the borough 22 years. I do believe these events are critical in sustaining the quality of life in our communities."

This year, the day of helping dozens of schools, libraries, nonprofit organizations and municipalities across Centre County was renamed the Col. Gerald Russell Day of Caring in honor of the event's founder, who died in February.

The day started with a breakfast for volunteers at the Bryce Jordan Center and included a ceremony at the Our Lady of Victory Preschool that paid tribute to Russell and his support for the United Way.

The morning's overcast skies and a slight chill didn't stop Linda Musser and John Corro from working outside. They painted shelves in the Children's Garden behind the Bellefonte Historical Museum.

Musser, who said she's been taking part in the Day of Caring since its beginning 21 years ago, said helping is always a nice break.

"You get to meet nice people and do good things for the community," she said. "It's not a bad day to be outside."

She said she always looks for projects in Bellefonte, where she lives. This year she chose the museum, where mismatched shelves were being painted a uniform black.

A few blocks away, Interfaith Mission was getting some help from a group of Bellefonte Area High School students, mainly members of the boys' and girls' soccer teams

Thirty-two students sorted clothes, moved boxes and cleaned windows.

"It's a good ministry here," teacher and chaperone Sandy Shirey said. "I really like what they do for the community."

Meanwhile, back at Centre House in State College, volunteers brightened up a residential unit with a fresh coat of paint. The rooms, connected by a hallway and sharing a bathroom, comprise one of the house's two family units, though at present, they're occupied by four single men.

Kendra Hicks, the Centre House manager, was grateful for the assistance.

"It's one of our family units that's in dire need of being painted," she said.

For her small staff, Hicks said, the job would be difficult, if not impossible, to finish in a day so that residents would not be displaced overnight. It's also hard to find the time while running the busy house, she said.

As a result, she said, tasks like repainting rooms constantly are pushed aside.

Over at Millbrook Marsh, Sam Komlenic lay on his back as he painted the bottom of a wooden fence.

He was part of a painting crew of nine from Penn State Outreach and Online Education.

"I've done Day of Caring for 17 years now, and it's awesome," Komlenic said. "You get to see your work pay off at places that wouldn't be able to get it done without spending a lot of money. It's also great team-building. Many hands make light the load."

State College Area High School students from Jennifer Lee's Wild Dream Team class of teenagers with intellectual and developmental disabilities teamed up with their Best Buddies to clean the Millbrook barn.

Best Buddies President Christen Lu, Maggie Hurley and Natalie Kerr, all seniors, helped sophomore Haley Smith sweep out the barn's dust-covered basement floor.

"It's our third year coming back here, and it's a lot of the same thing — cleaning the barn and the trails and getting as much done as we can," Lu said. "It's a fun, rewarding experience."

While students were helping out at Interfaith and Millbrook, schools were getting a hand from volunteers, too.

Chad Feather, Larry Mroz and Chris Bradley did some heaving lifting at Our Lady of Victory Preschool.

The trio worked with 12 others from PNC Bank to raise a patio six inches to line up with new security doors. They also moved a butterfly garden.

By noon, State College Orthodontics employees had already trimmed bushes, repaired a picnic table and painted a fence at the Old Gregg School in Spring Mills.

"Part of what we do is to make the community a better place to live," orthodontist Diane Ray said.

For volunteer Ashley Ohnmeiss-Moyer, being a part of a team to help keep up the school's grounds was something that hit home.

"I'm a Penns Valley native, so I want to better my community," said Ohnmeiss-Moyer, who has been volunteering with Day of Caring for four years. "It's pretty special to be here doing this today."

She and six other volunteers repainted the fence along Firehall Road and School Street that wrapped around a playground.

The painting part of the repairs took up most of the time, the volunteers said.

"There are so many places that need help and can't afford to keep it up," volunteer Sheridan Sheehan said. "I think we're lucky to do our part to help."

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