

'Great day' for Caring

As many as 1,500 volunteers swarmed county agencies on Saturday, offering to help however they could

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Audrey Blauch and Tim Price, son of Ralph and Jodi Price of Lebanon, carry mulch via wheelbarrows to other volunteers to spread on the two-mile nature trail at Coleman Memorial Park during the United Way's 17th annual Day of Caring on Saturday. Some 1,500 volunteers offered their services at 50 agencies and organizations, but the one site that drew the most assistance was Coleman Memorial Park. (LEBANON DAILY NEWS KATHY HACKLEMAN)

Lebanon County was swarming with volunteers on Saturday.

Nearly 1,500 people participated in the United Way's 17th annual Day of Caring, each providing three hours of labor for one of nearly 50 nonprofit agencies and organizations around the county.

"It was a great day," said Ruth Miller, who served as chairwoman of the Day of Caring Committee. "People were layered up because it started out cold, but everyone I talked to at the breakfast was looking forward to it. There was a lot of good energy. ...

"One thing I noticed this year was that there were lots and lots of entire families," she added. "The parents said they believe there's no time like the present to teach kids to give back to their community.



Connie Steinke, left, and Beth Rodkey, along with her two children, Lucy, 2, and Julia, 3, plant flowers at Coleman Memorial Park on Saturday. They were part of a group of nearly three dozen volunteers from the Cornwall-Lebanon Education Association. (LEBANON DAILY NEWS KATHY HACKLEMAN)

As happens every year, Coleman Memorial Park drew the greatest number of volunteers, with about 200 registering. Projects included general cleanup, painting and maintenance on the park's two-mile nature trail.

According to Sharon Southall, president of the Lebanon Valley Hiking Club, Saturday's volunteers were hard at work mulching and trimming bushes along the trail as well as painting blaze emblems to direct hikers along the path.

"This is our biggest annual volunteer event," she said. "Sometimes a group comes out to help us for a few hours or a day, but during the Day of Caring, we are able to prepare the trail for the season because of the volunteers."

Among the groups at Coleman were volunteers from Renaissance Crossroads in Lebanon, coordinated by Robert Hettinger, community service leader.

"There are 18 of us here today," Hettinger said. "We do a lot of work here at the park throughout the year, and today we will be supervising some of the volunteers because we have a good idea of what's here on the park grounds."

Another set of regular volunteers at the park was from Ebenezer United Methodist Church.



Tom Bailor works to create what is known as a gaga pit, an enclosure where children will play a game similar to dodgeball, and spectator seating at Cornwall's Camp Shand during the United Way's Day of Caring on Saturday. (LEBANON DAILY NEWS KATHY HACKLEMAN)

Jodi Price, the church's Sunday-school coordinator, organized the 16 church volunteers. "This is the second time we have worked here," she said. "We also tried last year, but it rained us out. We have a large group, so we try to pick a project where we can all be together, and the outdoor projects usually need the most people."

The Cornwall-Lebanon Education Association provided about 35 additional volunteers at the park. They were coordinated by Todd Gardner.

"We all want to give back to our community and help support our students and their families," Gardner said. "This is our third year - the second time at this park - and our group of volunteers grows each year."

At YMCA's Camp Shand in Cornwall, both the Lebanon Valley College basketball team and Zion United Methodist Church of Iona provided more than a dozen volunteers.

The basketball team volunteers, coordinated by head coach Brad McAlester, performed general maintenance duties, while McAlester found himself recruited as a carpenter's helper. He assisted volunteer Tom Bailor, an electrician who said he "learned by doing" from his carpenter father. Bailor is a regular volunteer at the camp, where his sister-in-law, Chris Smith, is the director.

On Saturday, the men built a "gaga pit," an enclosure inside which children play a game similar to dodge ball, only the balls must stay inside the low walls of the enclosure. They also constructed benches outside the pit for spectators.

"We've been coming here for three years," McAlester said. "We have done different things each year. It's neat to see the improvements over the years."

While the youth group from the Iona church was just one of many groups volunteering on Saturday, the teens had a unique story.

"We are in the middle of a 30-hour famine sponsored through World Vision," said Miles Dissinger, pastoral assistant and youth leader. "We haven't eaten since (Friday) at noon. We raised close to \$3,500, which will feed 10 children for a year. Our church has been participating in the 30-hour famine for several years. As part of that, we always try to do an outreach project.

"Thirty hours is long enough for anyone to feel hungry, so this gives us something else to focus on as we raise awareness about hunger across the world. ... We won't eat until tonight (Saturday night) when the kids' parents will fix us a meal at the church."

While Coleman Park and Camp Shand were the final volunteering destinations for several of the larger groups, there were many other volunteers out and about in smaller family groups or as individuals.

Juana Escoto rounded up her daughter, two nephews and a friend to help clean up the grounds of the Lebanon Community Library. Like the others, she said she was pleased to be able to help a good cause.

"I like to volunteer because it is contributing to the community," Escoto said. "We all feel better when we do for others. The children think it's fun to do, and it teaches them that everyone can contribute to make their community a better place."

Major sponsors of the Day of Caring in Lebanon County were the Lebanon Federal Credit Union and Zinn Insurance. Each of the volunteers received a T-shirt and was invited to a breakfast to kick off the morning.