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1,500 Students’ Early Saturday Morning Turns into a Productive Day of Community Service

By: Ambar Mercedes

Quinnipiac University students shook off their Saturday morning blues, grabbed coffee at Dunkin Donuts and went off to save the world, or at least a part of it.

That group at the donut shop near the Hamden, Connecticut, campus, joined some 1,500 students in participation in The Big Event, an annual work-a-thon in which students help non-profit organizations.

“Right now, I don’t really understand why I went out last night,” said Srinithi Raghunathan, a 20-year-old junior neuroscience major from Sharon, Massachusetts. “I know the Big Event is really important, but I need some time to wake up. Thank god for coffee.”

The Big Event coordinators held an opening ceremony thanking the original The Big Event coordinators. The ceremony also included remarks from University President Judy B. Olian, an event volunteer, who called students to understand the impact their volunteerism has on the local community.

“This is a way we give back to the community,” said Olian. “Sometimes we give back with our brains. Sometimes we give back with our brawn. But this is absolutely the commitment we made to our community.”

Organizers sent volunteers out to 87 local nonprofits around the Quinnipiac area to rake leaves, pick up trash and beautify an underpass near the Farmington Canal Trail in Hamden, Connecticut. University groups like Psi Chi, Quinnipiac’s psychology honor society, encouraged their members to volunteer in the event. Yet each student had their own motivation to go.

“Volunteerism is a huge in my family,” said Lauryn Linley, a 22-year-old junior neuroscience major from Monroe, Connecticut. “We volunteer at the Choose Love foundation started in the name of Jessie Lewis, a Sandy Hook shooting victim. I saw how our volunteering impacted our local community, so I try do as many events as I can.”

Hamden Youth Services, Hamden Parks Department and the Hamden Police Department worked together to organize the volunteer site. Four police officers helped to control the traffic under the bridge, Youth Services coordinated with a local artist to paint and the Parks department helped to provide rakes, shovels and trash bags.

“Every year we do Hamden’s national night out,” said Susan Rubino, Hamden Youth Services Coordinator. “It’s a police and community event, so they can get to know each other in a nonthreatening event. The national organization encourages communities to do a project throughout the year called Project 365 so it’s not just once a year. Our theme this year is ‘Clean, Safe and Beautiful Communities.’ We added an art initiative this year so to include artists like Hamden resident Shaunda Holloway who can add color to the city.”

Quinnipiac students were not the only college students who participated. Rubino also coordinated with two universities, Yale College and Southern Connecticut University State University, who also had The Big Event going on too.

“I think it’s really important that community members like university students who live in a town or city really feel like they are a part of it,” said Rubino. “Not just that they live and shop there. But that they are changing the landscape of it. When they drive under this small underpass, they are going to be like, ‘We cleaned that area. We had a part in this.’ It means something.”

Waves of white and blue The Big Event t-shirts lined up the trail and street. Everyone carrying at least a trash bag, poker or rake. Each of them not truly realizing the impact of their decision to attend.

“There are 12 of us,” said John Torgersen, a facilities worker for the Hamden Parks Department. We are in charge up setting up and taking down the outdoor event in Hamden like sport game sand concerts. We also have to maintain all of the public parks and trails. It’s a lot. A project like this would take us weeks to complete, making it impossible with our schedule.”

Nearby two Big Event volunteers put down their tools to come over and listen.

“That made me just realize we are so young and capable of a lot,” said Raghunathan.

“Naive too, said Katie Meschino, a 20-year-old junior neuroscience major from Niskayuna, New York. “I feel naive. We didn’t know that much work went into it. It seems so trivial now. We are just cleaning up trash. We didn’t even paint. It takes them days and weeks. We can do it in three hours. Students could have so much of an impact.”

“They—we don’t realize it, said Raghuanthan. “We could make a great change. It’s simple. Two or three hours tops.”