

North Side Gets a Boost

Bob Von Sternberg, Star Tribune

Quela Carlson hunched over a concrete footing in the back yard of a house in north Minneapolis on Monday morning, 1,100 miles from home. The teenager from Springfield, Va., was building a handicapped access ramp for someone she has never met.

"It's a matter of serving God -- and serving other people, too" she said. "Here, we can help a little girl who's never been able to walk right."

That little girl is Aquarius Taylor, 9, who suffers from congenital weakness in her legs, which makes traversing her crumbling back steps a painful chore. "That ramp's going to help her ride into the house," said her mother, LaTanya Taylor. "What they're doing for us is so nice."

As they mixed and poured concrete on a muggy morning, Carlson, 19, and her four fellow teenaged team members were part of something bigger. More than 150 teenagers from around the country are spending this week repairing and renovating two dozen houses on Minneapolis' North Side.

The City of Lakes Work Camp is the first time the 30-year-old Group Workcamps Foundation has come to Minneapolis.

"What's amazing about these kids is that they pay \$350 or \$400 for the privilege of spending a week sleeping on the floor in a school and eating cafeteria food," said Tim Schubach, an Ohio coordinator who is helping oversee the Minneapolis projects.

Lisa McCarty, chief photographer on the project, said the week-long effort "takes them [the students] out of their own little worlds. Maybe for the first time in their lives, it can take them out of their 'me' zone and see how people live who have less than they do."

McCarty's church, Maple Grove Lutheran Church, undertook the project in partnership with the Jordan New Life Community Church, which solicited applications from homeowners in the neighborhood. Twenty-four were selected from more than 250 submitted.

The Group Workcamps Foundation is a nonprofit organization based in Colorado that organizes Christian nondenominational volunteer experiences for teenagers and young adults nationwide and in other countries. According to the foundation, more than 210,000 volunteers have taken part.

"They do good work for these folks, but the spiritual growth you see in them is what's most amazing," Schubach said.

The workers are spending the week staying at Totino Grace High School in Fridley. The materials, such as paint, siding and lumber, have been donated, resulting in no cost to the homeowners.

"All of them start here with different skill sets and we know what those are when they sign up," Schubach said. "If they know about carpentry, we don't assign them to painting. They learn as they go and teach each other."

Carlson and her teammates figured the wooden deck and ramp at the Taylor house will take about four days to build.

"This is the sixth year in a row I've done this, so by now I've done just about everything -- paint, drywall, concrete," Carlson said. "I like it so much, I'm going to try to get on the staff."

Working alongside her was first-timer Ted Hamilton, a 14-year-old from Springfield, Ill. "Instead of just hanging around home all summer, it's a chance to help other people and do something for the community," he said.

Taylor is grateful for the help. "It's so hard for Aquarius because she can't keep her balance, so she can't walk very well," she said. "It helps me because I'm an itty-bitty woman and she's getting to be a big girl now."

As a way to say thank you to her work crew, Taylor planned to fire up her barbecue this afternoon. "They're such nice, nice kids, I decided I should barbecue for the first time," she said. "I don't know how good it'll be, but I'll do my best."

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