

Volunteers Raise Funds, Make Renovations Happen at Mars Home for Youth

By Hilary Daninhirsch

Someone once said, "Volunteers aren't paid, not because they are worthless, but because they are priceless."

Mars Home for Youth thrives on this spirit of volunteerism, where in recent months, volunteers have worked tirelessly to beautify the residential buildings and baseball field and renovate a clothing store.

The 131-year-old organization on Route 228 in Mars began as an orphanage. Since the 1970s, the facility has evolved into a temporary residential home for kids between the ages of 11 and 18, has opened an alternative school called Longmore Academy, and has branched out with community-based services. Many of the kids in their care come from impoverished backgrounds, have experienced neglect or abuse and struggle with mental illness.

Shellyn Shoenthal, director of Community Relations and Fundraising at Mars Home for Youth, said that she receives daily requests for people wondering what they can do to help. While there is no formal volunteer program with established roles, Shoenthal interviews each potential volunteer personally and tries to find an opportunity to match that person's particular skills. "I have a tremendous group of volunteers who really do want to make an impact in the lives of the kids," said Shoenthal.

While the Home relies heavily on outside volunteers, the teens in residence also get involved with helping to beautify their surroundings. For example, all of the kids helped clean the campus on Clean Up Day. "It was hard work, everyone griped, but at the end of the day, everyone was proud of themselves," said Shoenthal.

"People are drawn to volunteer for different reasons," she added. "Here, they see that kids really need angels on their side. They have so few people in their lives that they can trust. While they are here, they are working to build trust and working to understand that people care for them."

Some of the volunteers have been personally touched by Mars Home for Youth. One person who helped paint and refurbish some of the buildings on campus said that he had once been a resident—one of the "pay it forward" effects that Shoenthal enjoys witnessing.



Other ways in which the community has helped is by donating bikes or other sporting equipment, Christmas presents, clothing and even candy at Halloween. There are also volunteers who knit and crochet with the teenage girls.

Church groups volunteer frequently, including a group that sponsored a huge activity day, complete with a basketball game. A local Eagle Scout, in conjunction with Lowe's, helped renovate a baseball field.

Perhaps one of the most noteworthy contributions by volunteers was the complete overhaul and renovation of the clothing store on the premises. The teenagers in residence have shopping privileges, where they can 'buy' clothing, all of which has been donated.

Rozanne Matthews of Wexford had already organized a blues music show as a fundraiser for Mars Home for Youth but wanted to do more. It wasn't until she saw the storage facility for the clothing store that she had a brainstorm.

Originally, the basement of the administration building housed the donated clothing, stored in plastic containers. "If a child came to the Home and needed anything to get by until they got their own clothes, they'd have to go down into this dingy basement—it was so depressing," said Matthews. "I was practically moved to tears; all I could think of was how these teenage kids are at the lowest point in their lives and they have to go down into a basement and find a pair of jeans. I thought there should be a space designated on campus to display clothing."

She and Shoenthal found an unoccupied space in a carriage house on campus. After months of sorting and discarding inappropriate clothing, Matthews organized the clothing on racks. A few other volunteers came forward including Catherine Gallagher and Cindy Stunkard, and together they renovated the carriage house, including, "...painting, lifting carpets, scraping, cleaning and working our tails off," said Matthews.

The result is a boutique-style, aesthetically pleasing store called MHY's Mosaic's Closet. While Matthews is proud of the work that she and her co-volunteers accomplished, she praised the teenagers who are shopping at the new space. "They're making a big effort to keep it clean; they're taking pride in it," she said.

Shoenthal said that the new space is phenomenal. "We didn't even know what kind of gems we had in our volunteers until we let them loose and let them have some freedom," she said.

Matthews' involvement with Mars Home for Youth is ongoing. She plans to organize another concert, this time featuring blues and rock-and-roll artists. The fundraising event will be held on September 13 at the d'vine Wine Bar in Pine.

For more information about the upcoming show or for other ways in which to volunteer, visit the Home's website at www.marshomeforyouth.org.



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