



## 'Seniors Helping Seniors' community event lays foundation for change

by Barbara Wray



Superintendent  
Kirk Lewis

The sun had not been up for long on May 29, 2009, when Pasadena ISD seniors, with scrapers, paintbrushes and cans of paint in their hands, poured out of yellow school buses at job sites across town. Their mission: Put their Career and Technical Education skills to work by sprucing up the homes of senior citizens in the community.

It was the district's first-ever "Seniors Helping Seniors" event, an initiative in which 1,700 Pasadena ISD high school seniors refurbished 33 homes in a single day.



Sarah Wrobleski

"The district saw a good opportunity to get students involved in community service. At Pasadena ISD, we have a focus on service, and we wanted to walk the talk," says Sarah Wrobleski, director of Career and Technical Education. "We planned the workday in about

five weeks, which was unbelievable. People quickly got on board and they worked on this effort 24-7. I was up in the middle of the night buying paintbrushes on eBay!"

To locate homes for the project, Pasadena ISD forged a partnership with Rebuilding Together Houston, a nonprofit community outreach organization that provides no-cost home modifications and repairs to low-income and elderly homeowners, as well as individuals with disabilities.

"We encourage our students to make positive contributions in their community," says Kirk Lewis, Pasadena ISD superintendent. "By doing so, they are acquiring the knowledge and skills they need to achieve personal excellence and to become compassionate citizens."

Lewis was one of the many volunteers who readily pitched in to help the teams of high school students with scraping old paint, applying fresh paint, doing yard work and many other tasks. Several administrators and support personnel in Pasadena ISD joined the effort as well.

South Houston High School graduate David Devora, who participated in the workday, says the program should be expanded to include students in other grades.

"It would be great if everyone in the high schools could be a part of this, so they can see that life is about more than just them," Devora says. "We can leave our community better than it was because we have helped."

Seniors from Dobie, Memorial, Pasadena, Sam Rayburn and South Houston high schools participated in the district-wide "Seniors Helping Seniors" event. Many of the schools worked on the homes for a full week beforehand, utilizing students and teachers from agriculture and trades classes to complete the necessary carpentry and repair work leading up to the scheduled workday. The five high schools had between 20 and 40 students working at each of the sites.

"The students gained so much more from being involved in the early repairs and preparations," Wrobleski says. "It got them into the game earlier, and they felt ownership of the houses that 'their' senior citizens lived in."

The advance preparations, as well as the many tasks performed on the big workday, called for many hands. Some 300 adults were involved, including parents, school administrators, teachers and members of the community. Teachers went



Pasadena Memorial High School students prep an exterior wall prior to giving it a new coat of paint.

into the community to talk with homeowners ahead of time and help put their minds at ease about the project.

“Many of these people had been scammed by Hurricane Ike contractors and they were leery, understandably so,” says Wrobleski.

While some of the students climbed ladders to sand and paint the homes, others pulled weeds and tended flower gardens. But the homes weren’t the only ones getting makeovers. Cosmetology students at Pasadena High School offered complimentary hairstyling for the senior citizens.

Support for “Seniors Helping Seniors” came in many forms, from donating portable toilets on every site to supplying food to fuel the teams of hardworking teenagers. Adult volunteers from the community were charged with feeding the troops.

“We had people start at 8 o’clock in the morning, picking up pizzas every 15 minutes, to keep them delivered to the students,” Wrobleski says. She adds that the district also had to arrange for transportation and coordinate the delivery of gallons upon gallons of water to keep the students hydrated.

Recruiting volunteers proved much easier than securing corporate sponsors, however.

“With the economy, donations were tough to come by. We had to pound the pavement pretty hard,” Wrobleski says. “But I will say this: It was worth every bit of our effort.”

The district’s diligence resulted in sponsorships and donations from Waste Management Inc., Pepsi, Pizza Patron, Harris County Precinct 2 Commissioner Sylvia Garcia, Mexican Restaurants Inc., Seawinn Inc., Meador Staffing Services, Dr. Richard Helmle, Phelps State Farm Insurance Agency and Space City Airbrush.

Pasadena ISD volunteers secured numerous ahead-of-time donations, including 2,000 T-shirts for the volunteers and about the same number of paintbrushes. Rebuilding Together Houston provided paint, wood and other necessary supplies.

However, some of the most endearing support came from the senior citizens who owned the homes.

“The homeowners were so appreciative and they kept the compliments and thank-yous coming. That really made the day worthwhile for all of us — but especially for the kids,” Wrobleski says. “Some of the senior citizens even served up lemonade and cookies.”

Pearl Piehl, who lives in north Pasadena, says the students who worked on her home touched her heart.

“I live by myself and don’t have anyone to help me,” she says. “I appreciated this so much. I’d never had anyone do anything like this for me before.”

After the event, Pasadena ISD hosted an appreciation luncheon for the student volunteers.

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"There was a lot of discussion about what people had learned," Wrobleski says.

Some of the students talked about the relationships forged on the job sites, particularly the relationships forged with teachers and district staff.

"These students graduated last year, and they're coming back to visit us," Wrobleski says. "That did not used to happen. ... It's an affirmation for what we do as teachers too, when they come back."

At the luncheon, someone asked how many students had performed community service before participating in the "Seniors Helping Seniors" event. Out of the 100 students present, three raised their hands. When the students were asked if they would serve their community again if given the opportunity, every hand in the room went up.

"One student said that before the event, he hadn't realized he had anything to give," says Wrobleski. "This event was so very worth all the work it took to pull it off."

Project volunteer and district curriculum specialist Debi Krampen praised the work ethic of the students.

"These kids just dove right into this project, rolled up their sleeves and got to work," she says. "The lessons they have learned in this one day will last them a lifetime."



Nikki Lewis, a counselor at Sam Rayburn High School, chats with a senior citizen whose house received some much-needed attention during "Seniors Helping Seniors" day.

"A truly vital community finds its life when its young people dedicate their efforts to bettering their community," Lewis says. "Our students are setting a superior precedent of citizenship and leadership for others to follow through their commitment to community service."

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A student from Pasadena ISD's Sam Rayburn High School brightens up a house with fresh paint.