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Young volunteers pitch in to patch up Athens homes

By Ryan Blackburn | ryan.blackburn@onlineathens.com | Story updated at 11:58 pm on 7/8/2009

An army of teenagers brandishing paintbrushes, hammers and saws sprawled out across Athens early Wednesday on a mission to give dozens of homes a facelift.

By the end of the day Friday, 48 homes should be a bit more comfortable after several teams of handy teens apply fresh paint to walls, install new storm doors and build porch stoops.

"We're going to help people who need help either because they're disabled or for some other reason they can't do those minor repairs," said Bob Oertel, a member of the First Presbyterian Church in Athens who helped organize and supervise the projects with the nonprofit Group Workcamps Foundation.

More than 23,000 teens and adults will break into large groups (called workcamps) and spend a week in one of 60 cities from South Carolina to California. The interdenominational program is meant to expose teens to the challenges that people who live in poverty face every day, while leaving a lasting impression on the communities they serve.

This year is the first time the program has brought teens to Athens to fix up homes, Oertel said.

"I volunteered to serve in 31 camps in the last 17 years," he said. "And I got the idea that, by golly, we sure have people here in Athens who needed help, too."

The First Presbyterian Church of Athens put up more than \$30,000 for supplies like paint and lumber, and students held car-washes and other fundraisers to pay \$409 each for food and other expenses, Oertel said.

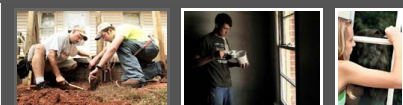
After each day of work, the teens retire to Clarke



Photos By Tricia Spaulding/Staff

Daryl Pfaff of Florida, left, and Michael Pister of North Carolina build steps on a back porch of a Vine Street residence Wednesday morning as part of the Group Workcamps Foundation volunteer effort held in Athens this week.

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Central High School, where they hold church services, play games and sleep.

Off Madison Heights, five teens are working to transform Nelly Freeman's one-story house, painting the outside bright yellow and repairing a stretch of rotting siding nearest the living room and bathroom that had been hollowed out by

termites.

Clifton Freeman, Nelly's son, had talked about repairing the siding, but with a knee replacement and another surgery scheduled for a bad hip, the project became too difficult a task to manage, Clifton said.

"When they told us they were going to do all that, it was just unbelievable," he said. "This is just beyond the call of duty, way beyond."

Some of the teens, like Gracie Sternal, from Boca Raton, Fla., set to work on the overgrown front yard.

"They looked around to see that (Nelly Freeman) really loves flowers, loves birds and she loves to sit on that porch," said Lauren MacQueen, a youth group leader.

At another home off Vine Street, teens painted the interior of George and Charlene Hester's red brick home and built steps for a much needed set of stairs along the front and back porch.

Without steps, both George, 75, and Charlene, 74, fell trying to walk down a makeshift stack of cinderblocks.

"It was killing them to get out and water their tomatoes," said Daryl Pfaff, another volunteer from Boca Raton.

While homeowners get help, the volunteers also will leave at the end of the week with a sense of satisfaction knowing they made an impact on someone's life, said Meghan Durfor, who came to Athens from Winchester, Va.

"It's just been really great to reach other people and see how much we can accomplish," Durfor said. "We can do this and nothing is going to stop us because God wants us to be here and do this."

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Posted by: [larrygriffin](#) at Jul. 9, 2009 at 4:03:59 am + 1 Rating

Thanks for helping these people in need. It is good to see good news for a change.

Posted by: [csummers](#) at Jul. 9, 2009 at 7:16:45 am

What an awesome story!

Posted by: [longsox](#) at Jul. 9, 2009 at 8:51:01 am

What a great story...to bad the teens who live in the Vine street area couldn't have pitched in too.

Posted by: [ladybug88](#) at Jul. 9, 2009 at 9:24:42 am + 1 Rating

I saw a couple of groups over in spring valley; I was wondering what they were doing. I'm glad we still have people in this world that are willing to help out when needed. Thanks to all.

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