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Youths descend on county to make repairs

Group WorkCamps makes fifth visit

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Nellie Holt considers herself a humanitarian, working over 20 years in the mental health field and volunteering afterward. One girl in particular stands out, Hope, who was deaf and blind. No one wanted to work with her because she was so difficult, but Holt and her quickly grew to care for each other.

Now she's the one being helped by five youths who are volunteering to build a wheelchair ramp and rail for the front stairs and paint her home through Group WorkCamps.

The weeklong event, attracting about 400 high school students, was co-hosted by the Lexington Housing Community Development Corp. to supply free labor to elderly and/or disabled homeowners. This year 67 homes will be repaired in Davidson County.

"It's one of the most wonderful things that's ever happened to me," Holt said with tears streaming down her face. "I didn't expect them to do as much as they've done. They've done more than build a ramp."

The student volunteers came from high schools throughout the nation and paid about \$400 to camp inside Lexington Middle School, where they sleep, shower and eat breakfast and dinner. While they may arrive with people from their hometowns, once in Lexington they're divided up into different work crews.

In just four days the six people on the crew working on Holt's home have become close friends, said Tony Chretien from Brookfield, Wis., who participated in a similar program for the first time five years ago.

"After two days you see how much work we've done with one small group in so little time," Chretien said. "The hardest part is leaving the crew and resident."

Group WorkCamps is a Christian organization, but none of the participants are discriminated because of faith, said Antionette Kerr, executive director of LHCCDC.



Carol Hoglen/The Dispatch
Group WorkCamps members Tony Chretien (from left), Kirsten Flennig, Emily Trudeau, Trey Reuther and Kimberly Homan paint and lay bricks on the front porch of Nellie Holt's house on Thurgood Avenue. The Lexington Housing Community Development Corp. is hosting approximately 400 high school students during this year's Group WorkCamps session.

This is the fifth time Group WorkCamps has visited Davidson County. The volunteers also came with canned foods, which they will donate Friday night to Pastor's Pantry.

"It really means a lot in times like these where everyone is cutting back to see that our camp numbers haven't suffered," Kerr said.

"Everybody has a talent, and it's neat to see them come together," said site coach Glenn Ruhl. "I go home with a sense of accomplishment and also knowing I was able to spread the word of God."

This is the eighth time Steve Cox of White Bear Lake, Minn., has volunteered, painting the inside and outside of Maggie Clark's home.

"The experience is great, getting to know different people and going somewhere you haven't been," Cox said. "It's a great way to grow in your faith and help someone in need."

Clark told the volunteers to make themselves at home, and they did just that as they began to work, she said.

"These young folks could be at the beach, but instead they take the time to help," Clark said. "I think I just added some grandchildren."

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