

Hundreds from SouthCoast give back for MLK Day

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NEW BEDFORD — More than 600 people from across SouthCoast made the MLK holiday a day of service — instead of a day off — by volunteering at Gifts to Give, the facility that recycles clothes and toys for children from needy families.

Jim Stevens, the chief executive officer and founder of Gifts to Give, said approximately 650 volunteers processed, organized and packaged 50,000 pounds of used children's clothes and toys by working a three-hour shift either in the morning or afternoon on Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

He said the volunteers represented a cross-section of the region, ranging in age from 3-80 and including students from 37 public schools as well as Bishop Stang, Tabor Academy and Friends Academy and four colleges: UMass Dartmouth, Bristol Community College, Bridgewater State University and Roger Williams University.

Normally, he said, they process 25,000 pounds of clothes and toys a week.

"In one day, we did two weeks' worth of work," Stevens said.

He said MLK Day is an important day for Gifts to Give, introducing many young people and adults to the charitable facility, located in a mill building in the city's South End, and the idea of community service.

Stevens said 10 percent of the young people who volunteered on MLK Day will return.

"If we're going to make a difference, it has to be that we connect children to giving and service," he said. "I like to call it tangible philanthropy and big citizenship."

Mayor Jon Mitchell was one of the speakers during the lunchtime break, which also included remarks by UMD Chancellor Jean MacCormack and Bristol District Attorney C. Samuel Sutter.

"This place is packed and it is a testament to the evolving message of Dr. King," Mitchell said later.

SouthCoast Serves, a collaboration of 35 community-based organizations, organized the day of service.

Deirdre Healy, assistant director of the Center for Civic Engagement at UMD, said 30 people pledged to perform 50 hours of community service during the year as part of the day.

"MLK understood that it is through service that you meet people who are different from you and it builds a community's social capital," she said.

Through community service, she said, individuals begin to ask what more they can do to better their communities.

The volunteers literally filled the floor space at Gifts to Give with the spirit of goodwill.

One of those was Samuel Racine, a 15-year-old New Bedford High School student who was volunteering with the DeMolay youth group. He said he has donated items in the past to Gifts to Give, but Monday marked the first time he volunteered his time.

"I feel kind of good. I feel like I'm actually doing something," he said.

Hope Quental of Berkley and her friend, Brie-Anne Lavoie of Fall River, were sorting children's clothes. It was the first time either had been at the facility.

"I think it's a great way to give back," Quental said.

The 12 members of UMD's men's basketball team also volunteered.

"It's nice to know you're going to help someone get to where you are," Alex Klepadlo, the team's captain, said as he and others sorted children's books.

John Genkos, a sophomore member of the team, is from Worcester and understands the struggles some families face.

"Anytime you help the inner-city kids, it's great," he said.

Eddie Rodrigues, former New Bedford High School basketball coach and an assistant at UMD, said the event is a learning opportunity for some players.

"It's great for our kids to see this," he said. "Some of our kids come from great situations, some don't, and it's great for them to see this."