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Love Merced 2013: Community comes together in effort to clean up the town

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MERCED -- Whether they were yanking shopping carts out of creeks, picking up litter in parks or writing letters to the troops, several hundred volunteers made Merced a better place Saturday during the Love Merced event.

The twice-yearly event, which is focused on beautifying the city, got its start in Modesto in 2007 and has grown to 44 cities -- mostly in the Central Valley.

There were nearly 700 people at Saturday's event, including about 150 students from UC Merced, said Aubrey Nelson, the Love Merced project coordinator.

She described the participation as "phenomenal" and said it's the best turnout Love Merced has had.

Nelson said Saturday was the third Love Merced event. She hopes the interest will continue for future projects.

The event kicked off at 9 a.m. in Applegate Park and after coordinating with organizers, volunteers dispersed to sites around the city to clean up and donate their time. Some of the cleanup sites included bike paths, creeks, McNamara Park, Rahilly Park, the bus depot, and Franklin and McSwain schools.

Several businesses donated to the event and a handful of local officials were in attendance, including Assemblyman Adam Gray, District 1 Supervisor John Pedrozo, District 2 Supervisor Hub Walsh and Merced City Councilman Mike Murphy.

City Councilman Josh Pedrozo hosted a barbecue and served hot dogs, chips and bottled water to volunteers when they returned back to Applegate Park after finishing their jobs, most of which took two hours or more to complete.

A group of 55 environmental students from UC Merced, led by UC instructor Lynn Sullivan, helped out Saturday.

"Our group is environmentally minded and it was our chance to give back to the community," Sullivan said.

Love Merced organizing committee member Erin Hamm said Love Merced is a great opportunity for parents to teach their children to pick up trash and not to litter. Hamm also noted the effects smoking has on the environment and said volunteers "picked up a ton of cigarette butts."

She emphasized Love Merced's ability to bring the community together.

"It's awesome to see longtime community members work together with UC students," Hamm said. "It helps people become more aware of cleaning the areas where they live as well."

Hamm said that the Love Merced organizing committee welcomes anyone who wants to help organize future volunteer cleanup events.

For more information about Love Merced, visit www.lovemerced.com.

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