

'Love Ceres' volunteers make a difference

- Love Ceres draws over 300 for acts of kindness, clean-up

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About 16 people showed up at Mike Swartzbaugh's Puma Way residence on Saturday morning to help spruce up his yard and cut back the bushes that grew over the sidewalk. It was one of 18 projects included in "Love Ceres," a faith-based organization of work projects designed to help others and improve the appearance Ceres.

"It would have taken me 500 years to do this," said Swartzbaugh, who tried to speak over the loud roar of a chain saw working on his hedge. "It feels very nice having this done."

Ceres code enforcement officer Frank Alvarez was intending to cite the Puma Way homeowner for allowing the bushes to overtake the sidewalk but instead scheduled volunteers to work on his yard for Love Ceres. Swartzbaugh said that landscaping in his yard had been damaged during an Oct. 4 police chase of a vehicle theft suspect that resulted in a crash and fire on his corner lot. Besides bush trimming and hauling off the debris, a crew from the Hatch Road Home Depot store brought in mulch and flowers to beautify his yard.

All throughout Ceres, from 9:30 a.m. to noon, volunteers turned out to help people they didn't even know.

"It was terrific," said Becki Nicholes, one of the event organizers. "I think we had less people but it went better and we accomplished bigger things."

Approximately 300 people signed up for job tasks through the loveceres.com website but more turned on the day of the event.

A crew of 25 to 30 worked to help clean up the Clinton Whitmore Mansion, which is now owned by the city.

"Look at how many people turned out today," said Lisa Mantarro Moore, president of the Clinton Whitmore Mansion Foundation, the group which is helping the city to operate the 1903 home. "My heart is just warm. I can't believe how many people who came to work today."

The Whitmore Mansion crew included brothers Chance, Couper and Gary Condit as well as members of state Senator Anthony Cannella's family and recently retired Ceres

Police Deputy Chief Mike Borges and wife Susan. Work details included cleaning debris from a garage and yard and placement in a large dumpster. Alexis and Sierra Nolan, a mother and daughter, volunteered to clean 10 windows on one floor. Inside the mansion volunteers like Joe Adams and wife Rachel helped clean furniture. Residents of Ceres since 1979, "Love Ceres" afforded the Adames their first time inside the historic mansion. The couple got involved in the event through their church, Big Valley Grace Community Church in Modesto.

"I think this is a good project," said Adams. "We went down the McHenry Mansion in Modesto and they've really brought that a long ways. There's possibilities here; it just takes money and a lot of work."

The mansion is still being rented out for bridal and private events by the Whitmore Home Foundation. Lisa Mantarro Moore, president of the Foundation, said her group is trying to build back the furniture collection after the estate sale stripped the home of some of the period pieces.

The foundation would like to spearhead the construction of outdoor restroom facilities.

"The goal is ... we're trying to help the city put this on a template path of how they can advance it into the future," said Moore. "The furnishings inside the house and all that stuff belong to the Foundation; the house and the structure belongs to the city and that's a relationship we can build on."

Cortni Ramsdell-Coutrakis and Randi Ramsdell-Jantz helped with the Booties and Babies drive, collecting brand-new items for 28 local expectant mothers.

"I think there was a bag for everybody," said Cortni.

The goodies were distributed at a Community Baby Shower, held from 10 a.m. to noon for the women who otherwise would have had no baby shower. Food, prizes for the moms and games were held at the Ceres Partnership for Healthy Children office on Fourth Street.

A crew of people that included Ceres Police Lt. Brent Smith, acting City Manager Toby Wells and Community Development Director Tom Westbrook, helped demolish a dilapidated garage for an elderly man between Seventh and Eighth streets off of Roeding Road. The crew, assisted by men from the a sober living house, filled up two bins with debris.

At Hale Aloha Convalescent Hospital in Ceres, Ramon and Marti Mendez led a group who visited residents.

Other Love Ceres projects included free car washes for senior citizens, clean-up of trash and weed pulling along public right of ways, and the feeding of volunteers by the Ceres Rotary Club at the Community Center.

Jeff Pichney of Big Valley Grace started Love Modesto and it was spread to Ceres partially through the efforts of Bryan and Becki Nicholes.

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