

Saturdays of Service

By Amanda Milford

On one chilly Saturday morning in December a group of around 30 high school students from New Tech High School are busy picking up trash from in front of the Trinity River Audubon Center (TRAC). The students — members of the Education is Freedom program (EIF) — volunteer one Saturday each month at TRAC for three hours. Many have been doing so since the volunteer project began being offered, nearly two years ago.

The community service hours they receive from participating count toward their graduation requirements, but many of the students here have already met their quota of hours. They continue volunteering every month, not out of obligation, but because they enjoy making a difference.

According to junior Hugo Muñoz, helping out at TRAC is the best way to spend a Saturday. “The work keeps you entertained,” he says.

“I like helping,” adds junior Gabriela Herrera. “I enjoy taking time to help the community. It's fun.”

The students all agree that it's also nice to get away from the city, out into nature, while also improving the environment. It's peaceful, they say.

Marleny Duron, a junior, enjoys having the opportunity to go on nature walks after finishing her work for the day. “Every time I come I pick up something to take as a souvenir, like leaves, acorns or rocks.”

The volunteer project is headed by Kevin Malonson, Assistant Director of College Persistence for Education is Freedom. He began offering the volunteer opportunity during the 2012-2013 school year after partnering with Tamsen Hanson of TRAC to offer community service hour options specifically for New Tech students. Another valuable partner has been Frances Murchison, Parent Liaison at New Tech. Each month, Murchison and Malonson collaborate on an email that they send out to students who then sign up and turn in permission forms prior to the project. Usually, there is a waiting list of students who are eager to attend.

“We have more trouble finding chaperones than kids,” says Murchison, who often chaperones the projects along with Malonson.

“I ask the students to follow one rule,” says Malonson. “That is to act like adults and work hard.” And the students meet and exceed this expectation. Even when assigned the occasional trash pick-up, which Malonson admits is not their favorite activity, they always do the work with enthusiasm and without complaint.

The projects each month vary, and the students have had a hand in planting grasses and foliage, building flower beds, maintaining the butterfly garden and constructing paths.

One of the favorite projects among students is the wattle fence they built bordering the parking lot. The fence is made of tree branches woven in between wooden posts, and the students constructed it over the course of two visits. The fence is now a permanent fixture of the Trinity River Audubon Center and is a point of pride for the young volunteers. “We get to see it every time we come in,” says Duron. “We get to say, ‘We did that.’”

On this particular Saturday, even the cold, dreary December weather doesn't dissuade the students from showing up to volunteer. After picking up trash, the group gathers inside the visitor's center and receives instructions on their next project: collecting prairie grass seeds and creating seed balls.

The volunteers split up into two lab rooms. In one, about a dozen students are busy pulling seeds off stalks of prairie grass into paper bags. Next door, the others mix clay, soil, seeds and water together. One thing is evident: These students don't mind getting their hands dirty. With clay-covered hands, the volunteers are having a good time, talking about plans for the holidays while shaping the muddy mixture into tiny seed balls. The seeds will eventually be planted on the property and will be yet another footprint on the Trinity River Audubon Center that these students have left.

“I am particularly proud of this program,” says Malonson, “And, more specifically, the students that participate and do such a fine job. They have made this work a joy, and they have made it so that other students from New Tech and hopefully more EIF schools can have opportunity to serve their community.”