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SERVICE HAS AN UNLIKELY SOURCE

Academy, agencies build character; students surprised by impact of experience

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Good work brought good news to a city high school for students on juvenile probation.

During the “Get Ur Good On Day of Service” in May, students, faculty and staff from The Academy Charter School in Carrick will work on service projects such as planting a garden, decorating bagged lunches for Meals on Wheels and painting picnic tables for nursing homes. The Academy is an alternative school for about 200 Pittsburgh Public Schools eighth- through 12th-graders currently or previously on juvenile probation.

“It’s going to be something that most people wouldn’t expect a school like this or kids like this to do,” said Charles Ellis, 18, of Brighton Heights, a senior at The Academy.

The Academy was one of three winners of the Pittsburgh Voices of Youth Creating Change competition, sponsored by The Pittsburgh Foundation and The Grable Foundation. The Academy and the Shaler Area and Steel Valley school districts each received a \$15,000 grant to implement their ideas. Shaler’s



money will go toward the construction of a library in Millvale, which now lacks one. Steel Valley’s will pay for home renovations as part of the “Extreme Home Makeover: Steel Valley” project.

Many of The Academy’s students have participated in similar projects through the Young Leaders Academy, a 20-minute character education class that teaches students the value of community service.

The class, a partnership with Pittsburgh Cares, a nonprofit that promotes volunteerism, will become a full class period next year, said instructor Meg Schreck.

The Day of Service was born from Get Ur Good On cards that Schreck handed out to recognize students for good behavior.

She said she’s seen tremendous growth in some students who had taken little interest in bettering themselves or their communities.

“You see a student let their guard down, and they start to share more about their lives,” Schreck said. “(They) feel like they can take ownership and see they can succeed and can be a leader.”

Many students at The Academy, established in 1982 at the request of the Allegheny County Juvenile Probation Office as an alternative to sending youths to juvenile detention, completed court-mandated community service. Last year, 92 percent of the seniors enrolled in the fall graduated in the spring.

“I really thought community service was pointless because, why

would I want to go out to a different neighborhood that wasn't mine to do stuff for people I would never see?" said Ellis. Being at The Academy has changed his outlook.

"(Character education) showed me you can have fun with it. It's not punishment," he said.

For most Academy students, school had been a negative experience, characterized by chronic truancy, said school director Bill Styche.

"I think this partnership with Pittsburgh Cares has really changed them," he said. "Now they can have a positive impact in their own community."

Ellis said he's looking forward to showing the community that he and his peers are "more than bad kids."

"I like it that I get the chance to prove to people that we're more than the public perceives us to be," Ellis said. "We can do things to better ourselves and communities around us."