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Summit students bring new life to McKeesport's Bennett Street

By Jennifer R. Vertullo

Students from the Butler County-based Summit Academy were greeted Tuesday by members of McKeesport's Fawcett Plan Task Force as the visiting teens put final touches on a neighborhood parklet.

In recent weeks, students from the private, residential school for court-adjudicated high-schoolers have been visiting the Bennett Street parklet to make landscaping improvements.

"We would love to thank the youth who participated in renewing this parklet for the Fawcett Plan residents," said Annette James, administrative assistant to Mayor Michael Cherepko. "It had gone into disrepair because some of the residents who are part of the local task force have become elderly or infirmed. They weren't able to take care of it anymore."

Rocky Tedesco, who maintained the park with neighbors until approximately two years ago, said he was impressed by students' work.

"I couldn't do it anymore," he said. "This is beautiful."

The mayor's office was asked to allow Summit Academy students to bring new life to the Bennett Street parklet as a community service project, James said.



Summit Academy students secure the sign they built during a revitalization project for the Bennett Street parklet in McKeesport's Fawcett Plan neighborhood.

Jeff Harshman, industrial trades coordinator at Summit Academy, is familiar with the Fawcett Plan because his wife grew up in the neighborhood.

"I put one call into Annette, and she was helpful in getting us in touch with the mayor," Harshman recalled.

"We wanted to make sure we weren't crossing any boundaries in making this happen, and the city was more than willing to let us take on the park."

Ta'Lon Dumas, a Summit Academy student from Philadelphia, said he and fellow students were happy to help.

"It was fun," he said, noting he was eager to take on the job, often asking whether materials had arrived and when students could get to work.

"We did a lot of weeding, trimmed the bushes and cleaned up garbage that was laying around," Ta'Lon said. "I saw the old, plastic bench that had been there a long time, and I wanted to build a new one."

Students designed a custom bench that also serves as a decorative planter for flowers. They placed mulch, donated by Ray's Tree Service, around the bench and a new hand-painted "Welcome to Fawcett Plan" sign.

“It took about a week or so,” he said. “We got the bench done and brought it back down. Every time we came back, we thought of something new to do.”

The final installation was the new Fawcett Plan sign that students drilled into place Tuesday.

“We weren’t looking for any recognition,” Ta’Lon said. “We wanted to do something for the city. I wasn’t expecting all this. It was a surprise to have (city officials and the media) come out.”

Cherepko presented a proclamation thanking Summit Academy students and staff for their hard work.

“What you see here is truly inspirational,” Cherepko told attendees of a small dedication ceremony. “It goes with the slogan we’ve adopted here in the city about working together for a better McKeesport.”

Cherepko said the city is grateful to have young volunteers helping to improve even the smallest corner of the city.

“Of all the places that they could have done a project, they chose the city of McKeesport,” he said. “We’re very appreciative of all their efforts.”

Following the dedication, students were treated to lunch, donated by Broadway Pizza.



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