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The BIG Event

TechNews recognizes those who spent their Saturday making our community a better place

Photos by Russel Houser, Mahek Rana, and Daksh Sharma



By Karl Rybaltowski
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Over 200 students struck out in all directions from the MTCC on Saturday morning, all with the goal of volunteering at local institutions in Bronzeville and Bridgeport and helping the community. For the university's third annual Big Event, churches, a nursing home, and even a settlement-house-style community center hosted IIT students who spent part of the day planting, building, and painting (among several other types of volunteer activities) as part of the university's biggest service learning event of the year.

The Big Event has always started with a search for local organizations that require volunteers for bigger projects, and this year was no different. What was different this year, however, was an even tighter focus on organizations in the Bronzeville and Bridgeport neighborhoods. "Our desire was to reach out to organizations

and entities close to campus, so we could give back – to be a good neighbor, if you will – to the community in which IIT resides," said Lynne Meyer, Director of the Office of Spiritual Life and Service Learning. This was marked by a shift to fewer sites, but with many more activities to tackle at each spot, and a focus on community. Meyer added, "while we recognize the value of things such as park cleanup, we tried to stay away from that kind of activity, preferring instead to look for sites where our volunteers would experience a more personal connection with the service being performed."

Roughly 100 volunteers went to Benton House, a community center in Bridgeport that operates a food pantry, after-school programs, and various youth programs including training in audio engineering. Benton House is in the middle of a large renovation and expansion effort, and volunteers were gladly accepted. In this, the Service Learning staff got some help from other community-related efforts on

campus. "The idea of going across to Benton House was first put forward by the Interfaith Youth Core - One Chicago, One Nation Community Ambassadors on campus, Mohini Lal (from Shimer College) and myself, as our 'Better Together' event, a celebration of youth coming together to make a difference to a local social issue disregarding any differences in faith or religious beliefs," said Utsav Gandhi. Lal added, "they gardened and cleaned and painted while talking and laughing and for some, meeting the community right next door for the first time." The volunteer effort was part of a larger interfaith initiative at Benton House that day, which culminated that evening in a celebration simply called "The Showcase."

Other sites near campus included First Trinity Lutheran Church, Olivet Baptist Church and the Bronzeville Park Nursing and Living Center. Service Learning has worked with some of these in the past, but the experience allowed for a greater understanding of how

much these institutions do, and a groundwork for future cooperation. "We've definitely created and built off of relationships with organizations from the past year in Service Learning," said Becca Waterloo, Service Learning intern, adding "hopefully we've encouraged a lot of people to get more involved in service or provided opportunities for those who already are involved."

The event was followed by Phi Kappa Sigma's annual Sausage Fest, coordinated to be part of the day's events this year. It combined food, games and live music, and was free for all participants in the Big Event. The Skulls also dedicated proceeds from Sausage Fest to benefit IPRO 335: Developing Technology to Transform Education throughout Haiti. Organizers agreed that despite the number of events and commitments occurring throughout the month of April, turnout for the Big Event was strong, and are already looking for ways to make it bigger in the coming year.