

Good Neighbors Belmont Hill Students Learn What It Means to Give Back

When Belmont Hill students heard about a devastating fire this spring in Lawrence that left many families homeless, they immediately stepped forward to help.

Under the guidance of school nurse and community service advisor Donna David, four student leaders took on the job of collecting much-needed food and clothing for Lazarus House, a community outreach organization in Lawrence that was helping the families.

The school gathered nearly 30 boxes and bags of groceries and brought them to Lazarus House. Because the organization had already received a great many clothing donations, clothing collected at Belmont Hill was directed to two other shelters.

Closer to home, the school has a long tradition of service to Belmont and its neighboring communities. "We're always looking for local needs," David said.

Student-members of the Work Crew volunteer to help people with chores, such as raking leaves or removing air conditioners from windows. The clients are referred by local churches, the Council on Aging and other agencies in Belmont, Arlington and Waltham.

If additional help is needed, the same team of two boys goes back, when possible, so they can develop a relationship with the people they're helping, David said.



The school also has a long-term partnership with Sandra's Lodge, a shelter for single women and children near the campus. Every fall, the football team tackles projects the maintenance staff can't get to, and at Easter time they bring "bunny baskets" for the children.

At a nearby nursing home, students started a Men's Poker Group several years ago that now includes women members and a wider variety of games. They also conduct an annual blood drive, run a haunted house to benefit the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, work with the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans and have an annual work day to help out a number of local agencies.

One of the students' favorite activities is "Elmo Day" at the Franciscan Children's Hospital. It's so popular that David runs a lottery to decide who will be able to wear the Elmo costume.

Belmont Hill also joined forces with the Winsor School and Newton Country Day School in February to raise more than \$1,200 for the Jimmy Fund at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute by selling flowers and collecting donations.

Cookies and Milk money contributions went to the Arthritis Foundation and Cystic Fibrosis Foundation in May, and the lacrosse team and several faculty members took part in the Arthritis Walk. A dress-down day brought in \$2,000 for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's Out of Darkness walk.

"All this exposes the kids to what it means to give back to the community," David said. "The kids come back a little bit changed because of that."

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"reasonable regulations concerning the bulk and height of structures and determining yard sizes, lot area, setbacks, open space, parking and building coverage requirements."

Under the Dover Amendment, churches and schools do not need the approval of local review boards for their construction plans.

Meanwhile, Natick officials began dragging their heels on the project and coming up with new issues for Walnut Hill to address.

The school was required to construct a large catch-basin garden in front of the new building. Once it was installed, the town Board of Health warned that it would fill with stagnant water and be a health problem. The school was forced to redesign the garden and install additional stormpipe drainage that hadn't been in the original plans.

Finally, to move the project along and avoid thousands of dollars in delays, school officials agreed to an informal review and one-on-one meetings with the town engineer to discuss the town's concerns, McInnis said.

Despite the school's good faith effort, town officials added demands that the school produce a stormwater operations and management plan for the entire campus, which would require additional staff people and expense.

School officials maintained that the plan should cover only the disturbed site but in the interest of good community relations, they agreed to move forward with a campus wide-plan while negotiating less-stringent requirements for compliance.

The town agreed to the less-stringent requirements, and the Land Disturbance permit is slated to be issued August 2008. The new dormitory was opened last September.

"Hopefully this has been a learning process – not just for Walnut Hill, but for the town of Natick regarding our protections under the Dover Amendment," McInnis said.