

Project VAN volunteers give back

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Hometown Weekly Staff

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By Daniel Curtin
Hometown Weekly Reporter

High-school-aged kids were working hard at the Needham Community Farm as they spent last Wednesday volunteering with Project VAN (Volunteers Around Needham).

The Project VAN program first began during the summer of 1998 and aims to provide one-day service projects around Needham for kids that are between eighth and 12th grade.

Volunteers who participated with Project VAN at the community farm got their hands dirty as they pulled out some of the older crops to create room to plant new crops and also weeded the beds.

Theresa Strachila, the farm manager with Needham Community Farm, praised the volunteers for the work that they put in.

“It’s the kind of thing that takes a long time for one or two people to do on their own, but with a bunch of people working together, it goes really quickly and we’re able to get a lot done,” Strachila said.

Project VAN, which boasts about 40 kids in the program this year, brings around 12 students to each event.

Christina Anastasia and Natalie Hohler were two of the volunteers with Project VAN who worked on the farm for the day.

“It makes me feel good about myself and going around Needham, helping, shows me how lucky we are,” Anastasia said.

Natalie Hohler appreciates the experience of giving back, but also likes being able to spend time with friends while doing so.

“It makes us better friends because it is one more thing that we get to do together,” Hohler said.



Pulling out weeds is tough work, but many hands make light work. Photos by Daniel Curtin

Project VAN has already helped out with the Needham Police Department, Needham Parks and Forestry, and Needham Council on Aging. Some of the projects they have already worked on include restocking food pantries, spending time with older members of the community, and cleaning up school grounds.

Clinician at Needham Youth and Family Services Carolyn Tracey is working with Project VAN for her second consecutive year.

“It’s exceptionally rewarding to have kids come at the beginning of the day and be a little hesitant or not sure of what to expect,” said Tracey. “Then at the end of the day, [they] make comments along the lines of ‘Wow, look how much we got done today,’ or ‘I just had the greatest conversation with this elderly gentleman who has been living in town forever.’”



Volunteers get their hands dirty to help maintain the Needham Community Far. Photos by Daniel Curtin

Nicole Luka, a summer intern for Needham Youth and Family Services who helped Tracey make sure Project VAN ran smoothly, believes it's a great way to give back to the community.

“If you want to do this to give back to the community, or do it for volunteer hours, this is the perfect way to get to know your town better and to feel like you actually did something good,” Luka said.

Project VAN has nine different service events spread over the last three weeks of July, and is funded by the Needham Community Council. For further information, visit www.needhamma.gov/youth/projectvan.