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SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2010



Wilton Montessori Middle School eighth-grader Meg Fay joins faculty adviser David Lavakas, eighth-graders Daniel Bogner, Marissa Brant and other members of their class to break ground on a perennial garden outside a housing development on Chestnut Street on Friday as part of an ongoing partnership with the Open Door Shelter.

Students sow seeds of community service

WILTON
By DANIELLE CAPALBO
Hour Staff Writer

Local students sowed the seeds of community service Friday, breaking ground for a perennial garden outside a housing development in South Norwalk.

"We want to make the lawn space more attractive for the residents," said 15-year-old Wilton resident Claire Phillips, an eighth-grade student at the Montessori Middle School in Norwalk and one of the project's leaders. "I have a

really nice garden, and it's so uplifting to come home to. To be able to walk around the flowers — it's important, and it can be very relaxing."

Fourteen Montessori students, including Phillips and 15-year-old Bella Firano, another project leader, spent the afternoon outside 70 Chestnut Ave., where the Open Door Shelter provides affordable, supportive housing to struggling families. The group will be planting sod and planting shrubs, roses, daisies and sunshine flowers in white, blue, pink and yellow.

"This is going to be nice and cheerful for them," said Carol Antonez, executive director of the Open Door Shelter. "It's great to see that the children want to do something to help out, to make something nice for others."

Students raised money for the project during the 2009-10 school year, said Rami DeAlwis, the head of the middle school. The perennial garden is the latest in a series of outreach efforts they've launched through an ongoing partnership

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LOCAL

Student partnership thriving

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with the shelter, she said.

DeAlwis said that every year, students are tasked with conceiving community service projects and bringing them to fruition. It was about five years ago that students first identified the shelter as an organization with which they should collaborate, and, since then, they've organized everything from clothing and food drives to buffet-style dinners for hundreds of people.

"They understand there are people much less fortunate than they are, and because of that, even if it's outside of their comfort zone, they need to put themselves out there to help others," DeAlwis said. "It makes the world a better place."

She added: "It's very authentic — it's all theirs. They're owning the educa-

tion and taking care of what needs to be done."

Beyond this particular partnership, DeAlwis said the students demonstrate an overarching, service-ready ethos from spending time with local senior citizens to doling out free hugs on International Peace Day. Every year, they raise between \$12,000 and \$15,000 to fund their community outreach and, with the remaining money, take an overseas field trip.

"It's all about building a global awareness," DeAlwis said.

For Phillips, the garden represents an opportunity to connect with the community — namely the kids her own age, she said.

"Last year, we made a lot of trips to the shelter, and they told us there are kids that live in the apartment building," she said. "They may not even know where

their next meal is going to come from. Up until last year, I didn't realize that was what happened. I didn't know there were children living there. That made me want to make a change."

Sites in the neighborhood managed by Future Shelter are slated for gardens, too. Students will return periodically for maintenance and upkeep.

"It's important to allow children to be aware that not everybody has the same lifestyle they do," Antonez said. During a conversation with a group of students, she asked what appeared to be a simple question — how many of the students in the room sleep in a bed at night? Every hand shot up.

"Not not everybody does," she said. "These experiences are real eye openers."