

For Mayor's 100 Days, Volunteers Give Day of Service

Thousands give up part of their Saturday to spruce up L.A. schools. Villaraigosa kicks off the event at alma mater.

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Thousands of volunteers planted pansies, painted over graffiti and picked up litter at 16 schools around Los Angeles on Saturday as part of a citywide day of service organized for the mayor's 100th day in office.

"This reaffirms what I have said all along: that L.A. is a city of heart," Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said at Fremont High School in South Los Angeles. "I can't think of a better way to spend my 100th day in office."

At 8 a.m., high school students, alumni, parents, members of neighborhood councils, painters from a local union and other volunteers and corporate sponsors helped the mayor kick off the day at Roosevelt High School, his alma mater, in Boyle Heights.

Ellen Chavez, 16, of Boyle Heights said she heard about the event from her marching band teacher. Chavez, who plays the trumpet, said she persuaded some of her bandmates to take part.

"I see it as a good thing to help the community," she said. "Hardly anybody takes time to help clean. They just leave everything to the janitors, and it's too much for them."

Chavez used a trowel to chip away at dry ground near the school's main courtyard to create a bed for Australian violets. It was her first attempt at gardening.

"We can tell no one waters this area," she said. "Everyone's always stepping on it when they cut through. I hope it lasts."

Elsewhere at the school, Marco Torres, an 18-year-old senior, stroked yellow paint onto a planter that had been covered in graffiti. On any other Saturday morning, he said, he would probably be sleeping or watching TV with his younger brother.

"This makes me feel good, giving back and helping the community look nice," Torres said. Besides, he added, friends told him that volunteering Saturday could wipe out the detention hours he had racked up from being late to school. "People are all tagging all the time," he said. "I used to do it before. Who didn't? But I'm just going to tell my little brother not to do it."

In Wilmington, Jim Morgan, 51, of Long Beach and 30 students in a global safety and security academy he helps run at Phineas Banning High School joined hundreds of others in sprucing up the campus.

Morgan, who describes his regular job as a harbor pilot as "valet parking ships in and out of" Los Angeles Harbor, said he and his students planted 24 trees and 100 bunches of flowers around the campus.

"It's just all concrete, and planting trees and flowers gives it character and a homey feeling," he said.

Back at Fremont High, some of the volunteers continued long after the event officially ended. Around noon, when Isela Guzman and about 10 fellow students saw that city officials were going to take away their cans of paint, the students poured the paint onto Styrofoam trays and kept working. They were just too excited about their mural, which showed a rat making friends with its natural enemy, the snake, in the desert and a girl reaching for the stars.

"I was just tired of seeing the walls all nasty," said Guzman, a 17-year-old senior whose hands were covered in blue and yellow paint. "It makes our school and the community look bad."

Danny Diaz, 16, who designed the mural, said he appreciated the fact that the mayor was paying attention to South Los Angeles, where, he said, many people think "we're nobodies." He and his friends debated whether the activities at Fremont were just a publicity stunt by the mayor.

"He probably wants to get future votes in this area," he concluded. If so, the plan was probably working, he said. "He's got my vote. When I'm old enough to vote."

The mayor gave pep talks at two of the six high schools he visited, but he did some digging or painting at four other schools, said Larry Frank, deputy mayor for neighborhood and community services. Roy Romer, superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, joined Villaraigosa on his whirlwind tour of the schools. He said he hoped the day of service would inspire parents to continue the beautification effort and volunteer to tutor in the schools. "This is a great day," he said. "It's just the beginning of a partnership."