

**THE**

**BIG EVENT**

**The spirit of volunteerism thrives  
as Sooner students teach each other  
the meaning of “community.”**

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**A**s the old saying goes, you can't keep a good man down—or in this case, a good cause.

Some 1,200 students braved April 1 downpours to participate in OU's first Big Event, an effort that assigned volunteers to spend a day providing help to area service organizations. The day was a culmination of 13 months of student planning and saw the recruitment of more than 1,800 volunteers to work with more than 100 community organizations.

**D**espite the fact that a number of outdoor service activities were canceled by the inclement weather—such as park cleanup and tree-planting—student organizers were pleased at the high numbers of those who remained on the job—even if it meant getting muddy in the process.

“At first it was really disappointing, but when we went out and did a tour of the job sites, I was overwhelmed,” Big Event chair Jamie Mozola said. “So many people showed up in the name of community service and were willing to stand in the rain for it.”

“There were people raking leaves in the rain and mud,” student program chair Mike Beckham said. “I didn’t think at first that anything was going to get done, but I was very impressed by the perseverance of people who took part.”

Through the morning and into the afternoon, student volunteers not only raked, but also cleaned, swept, painted, removed graffiti, hauled furniture and performed dozens of other tasks. The beneficiaries of their efforts included area schools, churches and agencies dedicated to helping battered women, the indigent, the mentally ill, the elderly, homeless persons, and abandoned and abused animals.

Wherever the Big Event proceeded as scheduled, there was no end of activity. Lavonne Sparks, who manages the food pantries for the Central Oklahoma Community Action Agency and serves as volunteer coordinator for East Main Place, said that “a ton” of students showed up at East Main for jobs such as painting, sanding, moving of heavy furniture, clearing woodpiles to make rooms usable and painting the facility’s lobby area. “It was fantastic,” she said. “I’ve never seen so many people here in my life.”

The number of student volunteers who participated at East Main Place

How many coeds can you cram into a food pantry? Nine, it seems, judging from Big Event volunteers who descended on Food and Shelter for Friends to stock the shelves with donated canned goods and otherwise make themselves useful. From left are Lisa Dionisio, Christy Busch, Kimberly Wetzler, Sarah Abington, Marie Dhimmar, Lowry Minton, Jenny Burns, Kerri Adams and Jennifer Hughes.



throughout the day totaled approximately 100. “I would say they probably did several thousand dollars’ worth of work,” Sparks said, adding that such contributions of labor allow agency workers to better serve the homeless and others in need of food and clothing.

And, according to Mazola, there is nothing like being able to say “yes” to such major requests for help from community organizations in need.

“We worked with people who said, ‘We have a need for one hundred students,’ and they thought there’s no way they could get that. It’s been great to say, ‘Sure, we have 1,800 students signed up, and we can give you a hundred.’ It feels really good to hear how happy they are that we could give them that kind of help.”

**T**he good feelings engendered by the volunteer-day effort were the just desserts of months of dedication by Mozola and several dozen other OU students. And the concept of the Big Event goes back even further in time—in fact, close to when these students were born.

The “Big Event” idea began in 1982 at Texas A&M University as a day set aside annually for students to perform service work for the community and individual families. It became an annual tradition, and this year some 5,100 Aggies participated in the effort, the largest of its kind in the nation. Oklahoma State University adopted the concept recently, holding its first Big Event in 1998.



OU's Rakesh Patel, president of the University of Oklahoma Student Association (UOSA) this past year, said that his interest in the Big Event began two years ago, when he participated in a conference on student government associations held at Texas A&M. After attending a session on the Big Event, Patel became so enthused with the idea that, when he ran for the leadership of UOSA with Chris Kannady in early 1999, the Patel-Kannady platform pledged to bring the Big Event to OU.



signed up for the April 1 projects.

To boost awareness in the week preceding the Big Event, students brought General Colin Powell to address a rally on March 28. According to Mozola, they had a little help in getting Powell's attention.

"We wanted to bring in a motivational speaker to inspire students to get involved, and Colin Powell's name came up because he is so well known for community service. We didn't think at first there was any way to get him to

**A**fter winning election in March 1999, Patel's proposal drew an enthusiastic reaction from OU President David Boren.

"He loved the idea," Patel said. "It really started with a lot of support from President Boren—he gave us start-up money and put the resources of the administration solidly behind us.

"My goal was not only to do community service, but also to provide an event where every student could be involved," Patel added. "It was a way to bring different groups of students together. That was what I conveyed to Jamie Mozola, the Big Event chair, and she did more with that idea than I ever could."

Mozola, who directed the effort throughout the fall and spring semesters, was no stranger to the rewards of volunteer effort. "I've been involved in volunteerism since I came to OU," she said, having worked with Habitat for Humanity and other service organizations. "It's really something that you can see, in front of you, how you're helping people. It makes you feel like you've accomplished something."

By early fall, Mozola and other planners had put together an executive committee of 13 students and a larger committee of 60 to 80 students to work on issues of budgeting, identifying potential sponsors and service agencies who would benefit from the event and raising awareness across campus.

"They really did it all," Nanette Hathaway, OU volunteer programs coordinator, said. She added that while providing administrative advice and support to the students, "I just sat back and signed purchase orders and made sure they had the release forms they had to have. We always have student-run events, but this is one of the 'purest' student-run events that I've ever seen."

"This was student-initiated, student-planned and student-run," Patel said.

By October, the students had prepared an eight-page booklet for distribution to Moore and Norman community leaders, describing the history of the Big Event, providing a detailed budget and soliciting sponsorship. The preparation paid off; the effort came in approximately \$10,000 under budget and was able to serve some 100 community agencies.

The Big Event actually began well before April, Mozola points out. A kickoff effort to attract student interest was held on November 13, when approximately 200 students turned out to help build three sheds for Habitat for Humanity. An informational event on campus in early February attracted several hundred students who



How many college kids does it take to change a light bulb? Just two, Zach Doss and Erin Rapp, at right, while their colleagues await their assignments at the Sooner Theatre work site during the Big Event.

come—and then it worked out very quickly. One week we mentioned it to President Boren, and the next week Powell was coming."

Student planners were faced with an additional challenge as the skies opened on April 1, and they sought to salvage as much of the day's activities as they could.

"A lot of our work was set up for raking and mowing lawns, raking leaves, painting and things like that," said Tara Palmer, who served on the Big Event student commit-

## General

tee. "I was at headquarters that morning, and we spent a lot of time answering phone calls, rerouting people to do indoor work and helping provide lunches for those who did take part."

According to Beckham, about half of the Big Event's job sites received volunteer help in spite of the rain. "And every single job site got visited. In a number of cases, the groups visiting that job site made arrangements to come back when the weather was better."

At one rained-out site, the Veterans Center, students subsequently returned to dig a large flowerbed, using supplies donated for that purpose, Mozola said.

On the other hand, at some locations, the weather did not stop students—or even slow them down. Emily Garman, volunteer coordinator for the Second Chance Animal Shelter in Norman, saw firsthand a sample of that dedication when some 40 members of the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity arrived as scheduled, to offer a day of work to the facility.

"They all showed up in raincoats, and they were ready to work," she said.

Over the next six hours, she recalled, the students "got down on their hands and knees and scrubbed down rooms with bleach. They went out in the rain and moved fencing for us. They organized files, moved furniture, bathed the dogs and brushed the cats."

"It was awesome," said Nathan Haskins, Sigma Phi Epsilon president. "Our house chose to participate as a group, and that's where we were assigned. There's nothing better than taking the time out to help others."

Garman said the experience "certainly changed my opinion of fraternity boys." And that, according to Patel, was a major purpose of the effort.

Patel assesses the Big Event's impact as at least twofold—not only to acquaint students with the diversity of volunteer opportunities in the community, but also to give area service agencies a positive experience working with students. The result, he hopes, will shatter stereotypes.



"This is about helping people realize that students are here to do more than party," Patel said. "We do more community service hours than any other age group. We want the community to realize that we're here for them as much as they're here for us. The only way you can eliminate stereotypes is by doing, not by talking."

Mozola notes that the Big Event provided a major opportunity to accomplish a goal as a student body instead of working singly as organizations. "OU's volunteer office is



TOP: OU's John Lauder milk, left, and Mike Johnson dispose of scrap lumber they have removed from the former veterans services building on east Main that is being converted into a centralized community service center for Norman's help agencies.

BOTTOM: Paige Merryman, left, Danita Isom and Lisa Blair scrape four layers of wallpaper off the walls of a former church parsonage that is being transformed by the Sarkeys Foundation into an incubator facility for start-up non-profits.

very active, and we have a lot of individual groups doing work, but the Big Event gave an opportunity for all these groups, who might not usually interact, to come together. It adds to your sense of school pride when you're doing something as a university."

Community service workers see an additional Big Event advantage. Sparks says that the contribution made by Big Event volunteers went beyond the April 1 effort—that those who participated were made aware, many for the first time, of the work of East Main Place and COAA in providing transitional living assistance, food and clothing for the homeless.

"We have had more volunteers take part from the stu-

dents' association and a lot of phone calls saying, 'Do you need help?' If we don't have volunteers, we are limited in the programs we can offer. They are vital."

**T**hat ongoing reward from this year's Big Event—of raising awareness of community needs and increasing the spirit of volunteerism among OU students year-round—is expected to boost participation in next year's effort. Mozola, a senior next year, will again serve as chair, and a second chair will be appointed to serve with her to provide continuity and apply the lessons learned next year to the year following.

Student planners hope next year's event will be bigger and better and envision in years ahead a coordinated Big Event among regional universities, or even a "national day of service" involving schools all over the country. But the Big Event, as it becomes an OU tradition, will have a special meaning to the University as well.

"Look at the mission statement of the University," Hathaway says. "One-third of our mission involves 'service to our state and our society.' The Big Event shows not only the University's commitment to teaching students the importance of service, but also the result of that teaching. The students are the ones who did this—I didn't say, 'Hey, let's have a Big Event day.' It was the students who said, 'We want to help our community.'"

In the end, according to Mozola, OU's first Big Event showed "how dedicated students were when they were put to the test."

And, persevering under rainy skies, the hundreds who made the Big Event a success brought a little more sunshine into the lives of hundreds more who are less fortunate.



When rain forced the volunteer Sooner workers indoors at the Rambling Oaks Assisted Living Center, they donated their time, attention and personal opinions in lieu of manual labor. The facility's director and former OU student leader, Dirk O'Hara, organized a round table discussion for the students with a number of the residents, who compared notes on social customs and lifestyles, then and now.

## **General Colin Powell raises awareness and fuels enthusiasm of student volunteers.**

OU's Big Event message of community service was hammered home at a March 28 awareness rally featuring General Colin Powell.

Looking over the approximately 4,000 students on hand at Lloyd Noble Center—many of them OU Big Event volunteers and middle school and high school honor students—Powell saluted his audience with the words, "You are Generation Excellent."

Powell challenged the students to use their talents to "make sure that none of our young people get left behind," and to give everyone opportunity to be a part of "the American economic dream."

Speaking on "The Ethics of Volunteerism in Society," Powell spoke for almost an hour of his own early years, his career as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1988-93, and the importance of his current work as chairman of America's Promise-The Alliance for Youth, an organization founded in 1997 to improve the lives of the nation's youth through volunteer effort.

Powell pointed out that as a child in the South Bronx he himself was in danger of heading down "the wrong path," and that helping hands, in the form of the attention and care of his extended family, kept him out of trouble.

# "YOU ARE GENERATION EXCELLENT"



The nation's most persuasive voice in support of volunteerism, General Colin Powell, helped kick off OU's first Big Event celebrating community service.

Noting that he had aunts who kept an eye on him from "every other window," he joked that today's Internet "was nothing compared to the speed of the aunt-net in the South Bronx" in keeping relatives updated on his activities and whereabouts. "The fullest expression of that love was to keep me 'in play,'" and out of a life of alienation and poverty, he added.

Powell described America's Promise as a movement designed to "reach out and touch every aspect of American society," based on five principles designed to help give all young people the same support given to him in his formative years.

The first principle, he said, was to ensure every young person having access to mentoring from a caring adult, through involvement with parents and expansion of volunteer programs such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters.

The second principle of the organization was to give young people "safe

places to learn and grow" during non-school hours, through volunteer after-school programs, YMCA and YWCA activities, and boys and girls clubs. "We're opening a new club every day somewhere in America," he added.

Powell said the third principle was to "make sure our children get a healthy start in life" through access to vaccinations and regular health care. He noted that America's Promise had struck a partnership with Lenscrafters, for that company to provide one million free eye exams to children in need, and that the company had provided 110,000 free exams and glasses during the past year.

A fourth principle, he said, was to provide children access to marketing skills needed to compete in a high-tech economy. "We can't have two classes in our society—one with access to good schools and computers, and the other without."

Finally, America's Promise seeks to

educate young people on the rewards of contributing to society through community service, Powell said. "Every youngster, early in life, should be exposed to the rewards of giving to others who are less fortunate."

The need is great, Powell pointed out, and precious lives are being left behind through neglect. "We have two million people in America who are in jail. No other nation has that percentage of their citizens in prison."

However, Powell saw reasons why the current generation could hope to significantly improve the world. Recalling that his own military career was shaped by the Cold War, he said a turning point in his life came during a 1988 meeting with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who told him, "You'll have to find a new enemy. The Cold War is over."

Powell sees the importance of those words for young people in the fact that "for the first time in one hundred years, there is no ideology competing with ours." Multiple opportunities exist to put the energies once focused on ideological struggle to use in reaching out to those on the fringes of society.

He recalled his involvement in the 1991 Gulf War and said that one reason troops performed so well in battle is because they were bound together by a spirit of family in their units. Noting the isolation of at-risk individuals in society as a whole, he insisted that "we still have responsibility as a society to bring back that spirit of family" by extending a helping hand through schools, churches and service agencies.

In words especially appropriate for the Big Event, Powell predicted, "We will be successful, because we are a giving nation, led by giving communities such as yours."

—Michael Waters