

A beautiful day in the neighborhood

JOBS: Kids work to clean up Birney school, other venues and earn money from city grant.

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Adrien Clark, 17, left, and Peter Ex, 20, help clean a garden at Birney Elementary School on August 6, 2009. The pair, along with others, have been spending the summer working on a variety of projects for the Wrigley Association, including neighborhood cleanups, the creation of a community garden and other jobs. (Jeff Gritchen/Long Beach Press-Telegram)



Keith Taylor takes a break from cleanup work up in the Birney Elementary School garden. I live here so I want (the neighborhood) to look good, says the Millikan student, 17. (Jeff Gritchen Staff Photographer)

LONG BEACH - Rizaley Bayot looked around for a rake. Ashley Kern and Keith Taylor alternated sweeping with sending and reading text messages on their phones, while Adrien Clark suddenly started darting and ducking as he was buzzed by a flying insect.

Such is life in the wilds of the Backyard Composting Center at Birney Elementary School.

On a weekday afternoon, 10 local teenagers were doing cleanup work at the school off Spring Street as part of jobs they were recently awarded through a beautification grant from the city that provides kids from struggling areas a chance to improve their neighborhoods, gain job skills and, better yet, earn a paycheck.

For the remainder of the summer and possibly beyond, teens will be gussying up neighborhoods in the Wrigley District and elsewhere.

The program and its funding are different from the summer youth job program that provided employment for 1,200 local teens through federal stimulus funds. Although some of those jobs entailed beautification, this grant is specifically aimed at reducing blight and designated for needy neighborhoods.

Parts of the Central Area and Westside are also covered for work done within the 90804, 90806 and 90813 ZIP codes. The kids must either be from those neighborhoods or attend school there, so they have a personal stake in the beautification effort.

"I live here so I want (the neighborhood) to look good," said Taylor, a 17-year-old Millikan student.

Rick Gonzalez, manager of the Youth Opportunities Center, which is managing the program, says the Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, Police Department and other agencies have been discussing using kids for projects ranging from planting trees and flowers gardens, to painting murals to community cleanups.

He encourages neighborhood groups, churches and nonprofits from the covered areas interested in using teens for beautification projects big or small call him at 562-570-4716 for information.

Although the grant has funding for 60 to 80 kids, who earn either an hourly wage or a stipend, to date only a few organizations, such as the Wrigley Neighborhood Advisory Group, have taken advantage.

Already, the group of teens in Wrigley has helped turn sod in community gardens, cleaned in and around schools and has been working 3 to 4 hours several times a week, longer on Saturdays.

Most of the kids had been passed over when applying for jobs earlier in the summer, but are happy with their new, um, digs.

The kids say they like being outside, except on hotter days, and take pride in making the neighborhoods look better.

Terriana Burris, a 17-year-old at Lakewood High, says it feels good to do something positive for the area, adding "as long as I'm making money, it's cool."

Airrillye Brown, 17, from Cabrillo High, was happy to get out of the house.

"I'm naturally lazy, so this is a good thing," she said, adding that getting paid is just a bonus.

Brown said she looked forward to showing her friends some of the projects she's worked on.

An artist, Brown hopes to be involved with some planned art and mural work. She also hopes to do some volunteer work in the neighborhood during the school year for her community service hours.

The oldest worker in the group, was Peter Eck, a 20-year-old student at Long Beach City College.

He worked this summer with **PeaceBuilders**, but wanted to get out of the office for the day and pitched in.

He echoed the sentiments of most about the program, saying, "It's good for the community, and it keeps the kids occupied."

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