



Land Bank gets a hand

Students clear properties to be renovated

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By Beata Mostafavi

bmostafavi@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6210

FLINT - Bubble gum-pink paint peels off the walls of a bedroom that looks like it may have once belonged to a little girl.

The torn smiling faces of Mickey Mouse and Goofy plaster the door next to a child's growth ruler marked with stickers for "five years old" and "six years old."

But for the University of Michigan-Flint students who spent Friday cleaning the debris-littered brick house with boarded-up windows, it's hard to believe a family once called this home.

"It's helping clean Flint up," said Robin Kacos, 29, a physical therapy major from Grand Blanc as she dumped stacks of dirty dishes from a kitchen sink into a giant garbage bag. "I want to help out the community."

A handful of UM-Flint students volunteered two days during time off from school for an "alternate spring break," helping the Genesee County Land Bank prepare foreclosed properties for renovation.

Their help comes at a good time, as the number of foreclosures continues to soar locally and nationally, with 3,000-plus Land Bank properties marked for restoration.

"I think it'll be a good experience to show them firsthand the result of blighted communities and that it starts one house at a time," said Glenn Johnson, assistant property manager at the Land Bank.

"This will give them a chance to see what we see."

Jeff Nugent, 39, of Dryden who recently took a buyout from Ford and is studying environmental science at UM-Flint, said he hadn't spent much time in the city.

"So far, it's just been coming to school and going home," he said, before moving mattresses outside to a trash bin. "This gets you out in the community."

And he could see the chance for something better in the dank, empty house scattered with trash.

"This is going to be a nice house," he said. "It just needs to be cleaned up and made livable for a new family."

In January, 5,000 properties in Genesee County reportedly were in foreclosure, of which 3,755 were owned

by banks, according to Flint ACORN, a civic action group.

Students spent the frigid morning tearing out carpet, dumping garbage and prepping houses so they could be fixed up for new owners.

Some students were part of a pilot series of classes at the university aimed to get first-time college freshmen more involved with the surrounding community. Others were just volunteers.

"We go to school here, and some of us live here," said accounting student Kelly Rowell, 27, of Flint Township. "It gives us a chance to clean up some of Flint and work with our community.

"It makes you appreciate what you have."

Andrew Bates, 23, an accounting and finance major, said it's one thing to read about the problem. It's another to do something about it.

"It makes you want to find ways to help more," Bates said. "I live in Flint. I want Flint to look better and be better."

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