

Volunteers, students plant trees to celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day

By AJ O'Leary

Millions around the country spent Martin Luther King Jr. Day at marches and in churches earlier this month. However, many middle and high school students in Durham chose a different way to celebrate: planting trees.

Jonathan Brooks is the principal of Eastway Elementary School, where students from Riverside High School, Rogers-Herr Middle School and others gathered on Jan. 20 to plant 45 trees.

"There are lots of different ways to serve," Brooks said. "This is our one way of giving back and serving the community."

Abby Gostling, one of two AmeriCorps members with Keep Durham Beautiful, helped host the event at Eastway Elementary. Gostling said it is especially important for places like Durham to have shade in public spaces.

"Durham is actually one of the hottest counties in North Carolina, and a big part of that is because of our lack of tree canopy," Gostling said.

Keep Durham Beautiful is just one of the organizations that supported the event either by giving money for trees or by showing up to participate. Other contributors were Durham Public Schools, Partners for Youth Opportunity, the Burt's Bees Greater Good Foundation, the Latino Community Credit Union, Trees Durham and Youth in Action.

The event ran from roughly 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. as over 100 students and other local volunteers braved freezing temperatures. For some like Landin Sledge, a junior at Middle College High School, it was a learning experience.

"Before I got here I was like 'I don't know who I'm going to know out here,' and I had never done volunteering before so I was like 'I'm a little scared,' Sledge said. "But when you do it with a group of friends that you know from your school, you'll have a great experience."

Others like Naema Leathers, an eighth-grader at Rogers-Herr Middle School, were eager to serve their community.

"You don't always have to care about yourself," Leathers said. "You've got to care about the environment that you live in, the community, the people that are in

your environment and how the environment looks."

Principal Brooks said each tree will be adopted by either a class at Eastway that will name the tree and take care of it until it is fully grown, or a community member who will do the same.

"The overall benefits that come with having healthy trees in the community are huge, and so we're grateful to have this opportunity," Brooks said. "Hopefully, we'll be the first of several schools to have this opportunity."

Brooks was one of over 20 Eastway employees to volunteer at the event and one of several to bring his child along with him. In addition to teaching current students about serving their communities, Brooks said he hopes the trees will have an impact for years to come.

Brooks said: "I can look out and tell my daughter who's here with me today - 20 years from now when I drive back over here and she's an adult - you may not remember, but this is what you spent MLK 2020 doing."

"You've got to care about the environment that you live in, the community, the people that are in your environment and how the environment looks."
- Naema Leathers



Bryar Lofffield, Jalyssa Davis and Naema Leathers spend the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday planting trees in Durham. Keep Durham Beautiful member, Abby Gostling, says it is "one of the hottest counties in North Carolina," due to lack of shade from trees. (Photo by AJ O'Leary.)