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# 'A sense of purpose': Volunteers mobilize for annual Day of Caring

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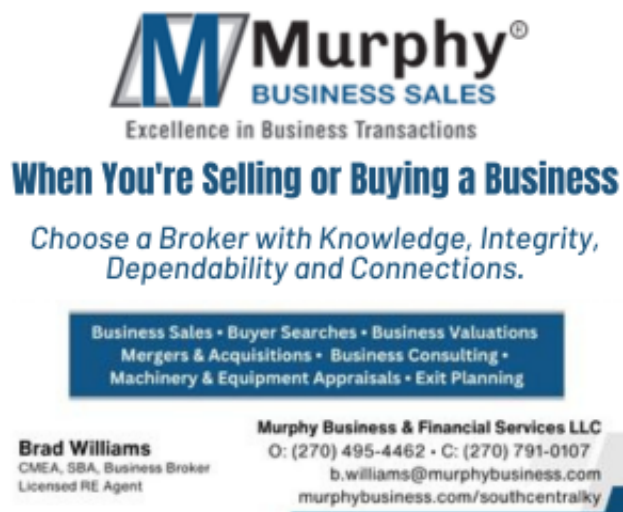


Western Kentucky University graduate assistant Audrey Griffin pushes a H.D. Carpenter Park, formerly known as West End Park, while volunteer Caring events on Wednesday, July 26, 2023. (Grace Ramey/[grace.ramey@](mailto:grace.ramey@) Grace Ramey)

If you've noticed a wave of freshly painted trail signs, newly cleaned buildings and smiling faces, it may just be the aftermath of United Way's Day of Caring.

Volunteers across southcentral Kentucky mobilized Wednesday for a torrent of charitable projects that ranged from school supply drives to ice cream socials to a fishing tournament.

Amid the activities, scores of families descended on West End Neighborhood Park for the West End Block Party sponsored by Trace Die Cast.



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Brenda Polley, human resource manager at Trace Die Cast, said the company previously held a block party after constructing the park's Born Learning Trail in 2019.

“Trace Die Cast has a very diverse workforce, and we have employees from all over the world – many different countries, many different languages,” Polley said. “We chose this area because it kind of encompasses all our

employee base, and we wanted to bring something to the community that would allow children to be able to play, and not only play but play and learn at the same time.”

Athletes from Western Kentucky University joined as volunteers to help paint faces, throw water balloons, serve food and entertain kids.

JaQues Evans, outside linebacker for WKU football, is reminded of his own upbringing when he gets to interact with kids like this.

“That was me growing up, I wanted to be a famous football player,” Evans said. “I looked up to all the older guys that were doing it, so it was kind of like, why not give back?”

Evans said his mother tells him “you can learn a lot from kids.” In part, working with kids has taught him about himself.

“I’m not just a football player, you know? I’m not just in this community to play football, I want to expand myself,” Evans said. “I want to help the youth as much as I can, help them grow and build myself up, build the community up, as much as I can.”

Katie Howard, outside hitter for WKU women’s volleyball, said she’s glad to see the teams come together to support an organization like United Way.

“I'm from (Bowling Green) and I had no idea that this even existed until I played Western volleyball,” Howard said. “It's nice that we have the whole Western community getting involved in our own community and finding organizations like this.”

Tyler Olden, shooting guard for WKU men's basketball, said volunteering often helps him and his peers “get outside themselves” in a way that puts life into perspective.

“We're kind of wrapped up in basketball and school and our social life all day, and we live a good life,” Olden said. “It's good to get outside yourself and see what other people are going through and doing, and to just give more of yourself and be able to give back to the community.”

Audrey Griffin, WKU athletics' graduate assistant, said the event was a chance for athletes to “put a name to a face” for members of the community.

“We always want (athletes) to choose something that's close to their heart, whether it's kids or the elderly or the humane society,” Griffin said. “We don't ever want them to just go out of obligation, we want them to pick something they're passionate about.”

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Griffin said many athletes already have relationships within the West End community, whether through family or by interacting with locals at other events. Day of Caring is a chance to reinforce those relationships.

“(Our) goal is just to try to support the Bowling Green community as much as they’re supporting our athletes,” Griffin said. “We’re very thankful that (United Way) reached out and wanted us to be a part of this.”

Across town, amid fields of corn and cows, volunteers from Atmos Energy and accounting firm Carr, Riggs & Ingram sweated through their blue volunteer shirts at the WKU farm.

They spent their workday re-staining wooden fences, tarping sod and building a new gazebo for Top Crops, a non-profit offering training and education for adults with disabilities. The program raises produce year-round and sells it each Saturday at the Community Farmers Market.

The program itself began as a Day of Caring project of its own a decade ago, co-founder Bill Greer said.

“We've been going now for 10 years, but it's the volunteers who come out and help that do things we would just never get done,” Greer said.

Atmos employee Austin Ramey was happy to help construct the gazebo — and spend a day outside the office.

“I was excited to come out here this morning and get away from work to help the community, help everybody here and enjoy the company,” Ramey said. “It's always good seeing everybody here helping out.”

It was Ramey's first year coming out for Day of Caring, but Atmos has had a presence at Top Crops from the beginning.

Greer spent 36 years working at Atmos, so the group has deep ties. Volunteers from Atmos helped construct the garden in 2013 and have volunteered every year since.

The garden beds, shade sails and high tunnel greenhouse were all built by Atmos volunteers, Greer said.

Like Ramey, employees from CRI came to help Top Crops for the first time this year. Kelly Keltner, a branch operations manager at CRI, said they'll likely be back.

“This is the first year (at Top Crops) and we just enjoy their story and what they do for people,” Keltner said. “It's unfortunate they tend to all these things, but they don't have time for preventive maintenance.”

CRI volunteers were busy loading heaps of weeds from around the greenhouse into a wheelbarrow. The work didn't seem to bother Keltner, who encouraged others to volunteer next year.

“We feel fortunate that we were even allowed the opportunity. I understand a lot of businesses maybe can't afford to have a large number of staff go out, but try to pick a time, pick a place,” Keltner said. “I just think they're so grateful for it, and once you see how grateful they are, it just gives you a sense of purpose.”

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