

Choate Rosemary Hall's annual community service day returns

September 30, 2022 07:02PM

By Jessica Simms, Record-Journal staff

WALLINGFORD — After a two-year hiatus caused by the pandemic, Choate Rosemary Hall's annual community service day returned on Friday.

Choate students, faculty and staff participated in community service projects across New Haven county — more than 1,000 volunteers strong, working at a few on-campus sites and 24 off-campus sites.

“The theme for this year is ‘Service Work is Justice Work,’ ” said Melissa Koomson, director of community service at Choate. “Everything has been ripped apart at the seams to expose all of the inequities and the impact on vulnerable communities throughout the world ... I remind the students that we are all in the same storm but we're all in different boats based on our privilege and such.”

According to Choate's website, community service day has been a tradition for over 100 years.

Alex Curtis, head of school, said having the event early in the school year helps students build connections with community organizations.



“It's fun for everyone to be out and about doing things and meeting people from outside of the campus,” Curtis said. “A lot of our students find out about either Wallingford or organizations in Wallingford and then end up connecting with them in a service way or getting to know the town more and that to us is really important.”

Groups on the private school's campus helped with landscaping, including removing overgrowth and invasive species, planting trees and bulbs, participating in a civil disobedience workshop and working with Katharine Owens, a professor at the University of Hartford and an artist who created a project called Entangled and Ingested, a life-sized portrait of a Bowhead whale made out of un-recycled plastic waste.

Owens said she hopes the project “connects us to the plastic bits all around us.”

Off campus, students worked at sites including the Connecticut Food Bank, Muddy Roots Farm, Masonicare, WYSH House in Meriden and the Wallingford YMCA.

At the YMCA, Sean Doherty, executive director, said a group did some yard work by the teen center at the east side branch and painted the inside of the Kinderhouse.

“Choate is an key partner for us, in fact their headmaster back in 1944 was one of our founding fathers of the Y, George St. John,” Doherty said. “... So we do a lot of work with them. This gives the opportunity for us to get some work done, for them to share and do community service, learn, paint. It’s all good.”

Academics have speculated over the years whether calls to service St. John offered students may have inspired the iconic lines of Choate alumnus President John F. Kennedy: “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

‘Role to play’

Koomson said she has been planning the community service day since last spring.

“I had sent out an interest form to organizations that we had partnered with previously and then word of mouth,” Koomson said. “As the director of community service, I already have connections with local organizations and such so it was making phone calls and Zoom meetings and whatnot to connect with organizations and see if they wanted to partner with us.”

Through community service day, Curtis said, students have a chance to learn that they have “a role to play” in the world.”



“We really try to have them understand from the beginning that they have a bigger role than just thinking about themselves, so any chance that we can get, whether in the classroom, on campus and then with the day when we stop the whole school,” Curtis said. “Everyone participates from staff members, administrators, faculty members, students, everybody doing it collectively, I think makes an institutional statement of understanding that we have larger responsibilities than just thinking about ourselves.”

jsimms@record-journal.com 203-317-2279 Twitter: @jessica_simms99