

South Bay high school students pitch in for LA fire relief

Sympathy for LA fire survivors spurs San Jose teens to organize fundraisers, create aid packets



Saratoga High's Mock Trial Club members carry bags of Winter coats, blankets, and sleeping bags to the Saratoga High main office to volunteer for the Sacred Heart organization in Saratoga, Calif., on Jan. 20 2025. (Nischal Jasti/Mosaic)



By **ELLA POLAK** | Mosaic

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Editor's Note: This article was written for Mosaic, an independent journalism training program for high school students who report and photograph stories under the guidance of professional journalists.

As wildfires continue to burn in Los Angeles, displacing tens of thousands of residents, South Bay high school students are mobilizing to provide relief. From assembling care packages to organizing donation drives, students and staff are finding creative ways to contribute to recovery efforts hundreds of miles away.

At Leland High School in San Jose, the Associated Student Body (ASB) team is hosting ongoing fundraisers to support fire survivors. The event raised funds for the Altadena Teen Girls and Teen Boys organizations, which operate free pop-up boutiques where kids and teenagers affected by the fires can find items like clothing, shoes, toys, and accessories at no cost.

Student volunteers from Leland sold discounted school apparel, accepted cash donations, and set up stations for attendees to make cards and #LAsStrong bracelets. The school has raised over \$1,200 so far and plans to solicit more donations at Leland's basketball games, as well as host additional fundraising events.

"The students in ASB decided to fundraise for teens after we all tried to imagine losing our homes," said Danielle Bellucci, a senior at Leland involved in the planning. "More than anyone, we high schoolers can empathize with other teenagers."

"When you see the images of homes completely destroyed and people with nothing but the clothes on their backs, it really hits you. Everyone should do their part, no matter how small," said Sophie Chanon, a Leland senior who also attended the event.

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Leland's initiative is just one of several student-led efforts across the South Bay to support wildfire



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Saratoga High School, for instance, dedicated part of its annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day service event to assist those affected. Over 100 students and adult volunteers participated, assembling more than 500 emergency kits for local nonprofits. Students created over 300 snack kits for San Jose's Martha's Kitchen, which supplies prepared meals to those experiencing food insecurity, and 200 kits for Sacred Heart, a nonprofit that gives emergency resources to families in need.

Saratoga High School faced an obstacle. As a public school, it cannot directly donate money to groups outside its jurisdiction due to state guidelines on fundraising. However, creating care packages does not violate these guidelines, as the donations are in the form of goods rather than money. By partnering with local nonprofits, Saratoga ensured that these tangible donations could reach those in need in disaster-impacted areas like Los Angeles.

"The organizations we are supporting are not based in LA, but give surplus supplies to LA organizations helping with wildfire relief efforts," said Matthew Torrens, an assistant principal at Saratoga High School.

Leland faced the same hurdle, which is why students only accepted cash for the apparel. By avoiding payments with checks or credit cards, Leland's ASB could use the cash to make out cashier's checks for LA nonprofits.

In some schools, students have set up donation drives rather than one-off fundraising events. Valentina Contreras, a freshman at Presentation High School, organized a two-week donation drive for clothes, hygiene products, and non-perishable foods as well as cash donations. The drive gathered about 550 N-95 masks, 500 bottles of water, and 200 sanitary wipe packets.

"My uncle works for CalFire, so I've heard firsthand about the devastation and how important it is to help people in need," Contreras said.

Students at other Bay Area schools also hope to contribute. Lincoln High School in San Jose is planning a clothing drive, and Santa Teresa High School in San Jose is aiming to raise at least \$500 at its upcoming Model United Nations conference, which will be attended by over 1,000 delegates. Larger efforts are taking place as well, with Fremont Union High School District arranging a fundraiser that started on Jan. 29 at Fremont, Homestead, Cupertino, Lynbrook, and Middle College high schools in Sunnyvale, Cupertino and San Jose.

These quickly organized fundraising efforts have been supported by an aggressive promotional push, with students using social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook to spread the word. Leland's ASB leaders also hung posters in school hallways, while organizers at Presentation High School sent emails to students.

The challenges of coordinating these events — tight deadlines, limited resources, and logistical hurdles — haven't deterred the students. Instead, they've galvanized efforts to make an impact despite the odds.

"I wanted to help because the wildfires in LA have caused so much destruction, and I just felt like I needed to do something to make a difference," Contreras said.



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