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'It's really rewarding' Volunteers turn out to give back to the community

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LAWRENCEVILLE - To some, it may have just looked like some average people were building your average fence at an average Lawrenceville residence on Saturday.

To Robin Cheatwood, it looked like something much more special.

Cheatwood, 23, suffers from Friedreich's ataxia - a form of muscular dystrophy that eats away at the body's nerves and has confined Cheatwood to a wheelchair. On Friday and Saturday, roughly 40 volunteers gave their time to build a fence behind the home where Cheatwood lives.

Staff Photos: Su Anderson
Lynn Robinette, founder of Wishes 4 Me, shovels dirt in the backyard of Kate's Home, a private residence for disabled adults that her foundation runs, while resident Robin Cheatwood watches, during Great Days of Service. Volunteers came to do landscaping and to build a fence at the Lawrenceville home.

The volunteers, who were from Georgia Power and Georgia Gwinnett College, were a few of the projected 20,000 people expected to participate in Friday and Saturday's Great Days of Service.

"All these people want to show their support and it really helps and touches us," Cheatwood said.

Cheatwood and Kim Swiatek, who also suffers from Friedreich's ataxia, live in a private residence run by the Wishes 4 Me Foundation. The organization seeks to provide housing and care for disabled adults so they don't have to live in nursing homes.

"It's a chance to interact with other people," said Swiatek, 40. "It keeps us from slipping into depression and it keeps our minds active."

Wishes 4 Me has owned the house for a little over a year now and some improvements - like adding a fence to provide security and privacy for the residents - were needed.

Rachel Bailey of Dacula was one of the volunteers helping shovel dirt and put up fence posts on Saturday. Bailey is a member of Georgia Power's community service group and has been a part of Gwinnett's Great Days of Service for several years.

"If there are things you can do to help out other people, I think you should," Bailey said.

Daniel Higgins, a freshman at Georgia Gwinnett College, was new to the Great Days of Service. The Lawrenceville resident was



Volunteer Rick Bembas holds a side of the auger used to dig post holes where a 6-foot fence will be placed around the back of a Lawrenceville home for disabled adults to provide more security. Other projects around the yard were done by volunteers out for Great Days of Service on Friday and Saturday.

participating in the event to fulfill one of the requirements for his freshman seminar, which has students help on a project and write about the experience. Higgins said he wasn't quite sure what to expect when he went to volunteer Saturday.

"I didn't know about it at first, but when you get here and find out what it's for it's really rewarding," he said.

About 400 Georgia Gwinnett College students were expected to participate in Great Days of Service projects on Friday and Saturday, making the college the largest volunteer group in the county, said Nicole Love. Love is the assistant director of the Gwinnett Coalition for Health and Human Services - the group that has organized the Great Days of Service for the last eight years.

Love said heavy clouds did cause some concern about rain on Friday and Saturday because many of the projects were outside, but everything went smoothly.

"Despite the rain (on Friday), the volunteers showed up and did what they came to do," Love said.

Lynn Robinette, founder of the Wishes 4 Me Foundation, said the work being done and materials that were donated to help build the fence were worth about \$10,000.

"We count on these volunteers and donations," Robinette said.

Fortunately for anyone who missed out on the Great Days of Service and still wants to help, Wishes 4 Me is always looking for support. The organization can use monetary donations, as well as items like garbage bags, bath tissue and detergent, Robinette said.

The foundation also plans to open a second house for four male disabled men and is in need of pots, pans, towels and other items for that home.

Anyone wishing to donate can visit www.wishes4me.org.

Cheatwood also said they would love donations of used cell phones or empty ink cartridges, which the women can recycle to earn free equipment and cash.

Anyone interested in getting involved with next year's Great Days of Service can e-mail Love at nicole@gwinnettcoalition.org.

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