Stirred to action

Liberty Elementary students channel leadership into community service

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LIBERTY — Six fifth-grade students from Randolph County were accepted into the N.C. Department of Public Instruction (DPI) Student Leadership Institute, held at Pfeiffer University in June 2016. The four-day institute focused on leadership through service experiences. When the students returned to school in the fall, they launched a service learning club at Liberty Elementary.

Teams must apply to participate in the institute. For those selected, all expenses are paid, including meals, lodging, and transportation to and from the experiential learning site. Student participants receive:

■ A half day of team building experiences.
■ A full day of minds-on learning from experienced trainers in character and leadership development.
■ A half day of hands-on learning at an experiential learning site near Pfeiffer University.
■ A half day of training in service-learning action-planning.

The program supports service-learning, character building and leadership development.

“We learned about how to be leaders and what good leaders are,” Morgan Heilig, a fifth-grader at Liberty Elementary, said. “One day, we talked about how to reach out to the homeless people and how to help the people in need.”

Shannon Staley, a fourth-grade teacher at Liberty Elementary, accompanied rising fifth-grade students Heilig, Reese Heim, Julio Martinez, Leslie Pacheco, Grant Powers and Noelle Swaim.

Young Leadership — Graduates of the 2016 DPI Student Leadership Institute began Operation Donation to provide food and clothing to those in need. Pictured, from left, are Reese Heim, Noelle Swaim, Morgan Heilig and Julio Martinez. Not pictured are Leslie Pacheco and Grant Powers.

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CRAFTY TOUCH — Logan Fox, left, and Stephen Beeson show off a hand-painted pot filled with marigolds. A collection of such planters encircle the community garden.

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to the 2016 institute.
While there, the team created school-wide projects that could be implemented in their community.

“We got the thought of doing donations for clothes and canned foods to help them, so we started this thing called Operation Donation,” Heilig said. To implement the idea, “Mrs. Staley suggested that we do a club.”

With the support of Principal Kelli Harrell, Staley and her students launched a service learning club at Liberty Elementary. In addition to the leadership institute graduates, club members also included fifth-graders Travis Cockman, Logan Fox, Jaliyah Harris and Katie Jo Staley; fourth-graders Stephen Beeson, Kaylan Currin, Madison Hicks, Amelia Lackey, Zoey Pugh and Kaylee Shephard.

To implement Operation Donation, the club solicited donations from each grade level. Each grade was challenged to collect a specific item, such as canned goods, toiletries or clothing. They motivated students to donate with a contest and provided the winning class a party. Once the drive was over and shelves were stocked, the club opened the pantry on three different dates. After the third pantry event, most of what had been collected had been distributed to the community.

“We reached out to a lot of people, and then we thought, how can we reach out to more?” Heilig said. “So, we started the school garden.”

The club took on a second big project when it planted and maintained a garden during the spring. When it was harvested, the students will donate the food to the Liberty Association of Churches food bank. Surrounded by marigolds in pots hand-painted by the students, the garden includes basil, squash, carrots, tomatoes, okra, cucumbers, peas, green beans, watermelon and peppers. “We are also partnering with community members to help take care of the garden in the summer,” Staley said.

Five fourth-grade students from the club — Lackey, Currin, Pugh, Shephard and Hicks — applied for the 2017 leadership institute and recently learned they were accepted. They will attend with Staley June 28-July 1.

“`I want to go because I want to learn more about how to be a leader,” Hicks said. She wants to continue to help others as well as help teach her peers how to be leaders. “I think it’ll be a good learning experience,” Lackey said.

She wanted to hone her leadership skills, “but not be bossy.”

Shepherd agreed it will be a great learning experience. She looks forward to learning more about leadership, which she plans to use “helping the community, like picking up trash. And helping homeless people.”

The group has already discussed looking into projects about curbing texting and drunk driving in high school as well as reducing global warming while at the institute. They also have big ideas for the 2017-18 school year.

One idea is to provide "pillows, blankets and quilts to take to hospitals for cancer, people that are hurt and kids especially." Pugh said.

“And we were talking about doing something with animals,” Currin said. “Helping animal shelters and doing things for stray animals.”

Heilig will be moving up to middle school in the fall and would like to see a similar service club created at that level. Back at Liberty Elementary, there is plenty of support to keep the ideas and projects going as the service club prepares for the 2017-18 school year. And if the garden is successful, rising fifth-graders plan to keep it going next year, too.

GROWING TOGETHER — Liberty Elementary service learning club members proudly show off their community garden. Pictured, from left, back row: Amelia Lackey, Katie Jo Staley, Kaylan Currin, Travis Cockman, Noelle Swaim, Stephen Beeson and Madison Hicks; and front row: Logan Fox, Kaylee Shepherd, Julio Martinez, Jaliyah Harris, Morgan Heilig, Reese Heim, Landon Fox and Zoey Pugh.

WELL STOCKED — Members of Liberty Elementary’s service learning club collected enough food and clothing for three community giveaway events.

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