

University of Michigan-Flint students help clean houses for the Genesee County Land Bank

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Jim Cheek | The Flint JournalJ.J.

Shaver of Flint dumps trash into a dumpster as part of an "Alternative Spring Break" with other University of Michigan students. The group helped clean a home on East Hemphill Road.

Flint, Michigan -- University of Michigan-Flint students cleared trash out of an abandoned house Friday, the first step to making it a home for a family again. UM-Flint worked with the Genesee County Land Bank on the project.

FLINT -- Bubble gum pink paint peels off the walls of a bedroom that looks like it may have once belonged to a little girl.

The torn smiling faces of Mickey Mouse and Goofy plaster the door next to a child's growth ruler marked with stickers for "five years old" and "six years old."

But for the University of Michigan-Flint students who spent Friday cleaning the debris-littered brick house with boarded up windows, it's hard to believe a family once called this home.

"It's helping clean Flint up," said physical therapy major Robin Kacos, 29, of Grand Blanc as she dumped stacks of dirty dishes from a kitchen sink into a giant garbage bag. "I want to help out the community."

A handful of UM-Flint students volunteered two days during time off from school for an "alternate spring break," helping the Genesee County Land Bank prepare foreclosed properties for renovation.

Their help comes at a good time, as the number of foreclosures continues to soar locally and nationally, with 3,000-plus Land Bank properties marked for restoration.

"I think it'll be a good experience to show them firsthand the result of blighted communities and that it starts one house at a time," said Glenn Johnson, assistant property manager at the Land Bank.

"This will give them a chance to see what we see."

Jeff Nugent, 39, of Dryden who recently took a buyout from Ford Motor Company and is studying environmental science at UM-Flint, said he hadn't spent much time in the city.

"So far it's just been coming to school and going home," he said, before moving mattresses outside to a Dumpster. "This gets you out in the community."

And, he could see the chance for something better in the dank, empty house scattered with trash.

"This is going to be a nice house," he said. "It just needs to be cleaned up and made livable for a new family."

In January, 5,000 properties in Genesee County were reportedly in foreclosure and 3,755 of them were bank-owned, according to Flint ACORN, a group that addresses the foreclosure crisis.

Students spent the frigid morning tearing out carpet, dumping garbage and prepping houses so they could be fixed up for new owners.

Some students were part of a pilot series of classes at the university aimed to get first time college freshman more involved with the surrounding community.

Others were just volunteers.

"We go to school here and some of us live here," said accounting student Kelly Rowell, 27, of Flint Township. "It gives us a chance to clean up some of Flint and work with our community.

"It makes you appreciate what you have."

Andrew Bates, 23, an accounting and finance major, said it's one thing to read about the problem. It's another to do something about it.

"It makes you want to find ways to help more," Bates said. "I live in Flint. I want Flint to look better and be better."

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