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Children make civic pride bloom

By Karen Rohrbacher

Eagle-Tribune Writer

LAWRENCE -- While their friends were busy sleeping in or swimming, a group of children spent the last two months clearing a partially vacant lot downtown, planting flowers and building a path for area residents to enjoy.

Evaristo Lopez, 13, said he wanted to try something a little different this summer.



Chad E. Bernard (left), 15, son of Lynne Bernard, and James R. Blatchford, 13, son of Averill and Richard Blatchford, all of Lawrence, work to improve the landscaping in a city lot. The two are members of the Youth Volunteer Corps.

"We've taken from the community. Why not give back to the community?" he asked.

Friend James R.W. Blatchford, 13, agreed.

"It seemed like we could do something for the community," he said.

The group of about 15 children are part of the Youth Volunteer Corps, sponsored by the Merrimack Valley Chamber of Commerce as part of its community service program.

Last week, the children were given certificates of appreciation by Groundwork Lawrence, an organization that works with neighborhoods to improve the local environment and community appearance.

The large lot, at Chestnut and White Streets behind the Mary Immaculate Home, was once the site of a Roman Catholic church. About half of the property was converted into 31 small community gardens, given to residents each year by a local Earth Day committee. The program, which started five years ago, is now coordinated through Groundwork Lawrence.

The youths focused on a part of the property that had been left fallow due to concerns about high lead levels and because the program ran out of supplies to mark off the plots. They helped

clean up the property and laid a path made of cedar chips and lined with rocks that winds behind the gardens, around the front of the property and past a small bench in one corner.

They also planted several flower beds, including one in the shape of the Youth Volunteer Corps program logo. There's also the beginning of a wildflower garden.

It is the first time children from the volunteer program have come to help with a Groundwork Lawrence program, said Marianne Paley, Groundwork Lawrence's program manager. The work on the garden was one of several projects that the volunteers could sign on to do. Other children painted murals for street corners and made ceramic tiles marking historic locations around the city.

But the garden group said they volunteered for the work because it was a clear way to help the environment and make the city look more pleasant.

A landscape architect helped supervise and taught the children about different plants, but the children had a lot of choice in what and when to plant, said Ms. Paley. The volunteers are encouraged to keep tending the garden, even though their official time at the site is over.

"I wanted to help people see the world look beautiful," said Jessica A. Rosario, 14.