

Teen volunteers change the world, one neighborhood at a time

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DALLAS—While many teenagers typically spend free time in the summer swimming at the beach or watching TV, 230 students from five states arrived in Dallas recently to paint siding, build ramps and work on roofs in 100-degree heat. And each student paid an average of \$250 for the privilege.



Christian Leonard, 14, takes care to seal crevices with caulk along brick of a home in Dallas. (PHOTOS/Grace Gaddy)

Ask one of them why, and they will quickly share the reason—to show the love of Christ.

[World Changers](#), a ministry of the Southern Baptist Convention North American Mission Board, each summer provides students across America an opportunity to demonstrate the love of God through volunteer labor repairing houses for low-income families.

Shawn Edwards, the project coordinator for Dallas and Waco, said the weeklong event shifts students' focus and gives them a life-changing experience.

“At World Changers, it’s totally different than like at a lot of summer camps ... where a lot of it is all about you,” Edwards said. “At World Changers, it’s all about you giving to somebody else. It’s all about others.”

Edwards cited Jesus’ words—“the greatest among you will be your servant”—to define their mission.



Josh Kicker, 14, uses a caulk gun for sealing as he works on a World Changers project in Dallas. (PHOTOS/Grace Gaddy)

Students from 11 churches participated in the project, with many students carpooling and traveling from out of state with youth groups. Upon arrival, students trained for positions and divided into 18 crews ranging from 10 to 16 members.

“Primarily, junior high students do painting and light repairs to homes, and the senior high students do more complicated things like roofing, vinyl siding, building wheelchair ramps—things like that,” Edwards said.

World Changers partnered with [People Helping People](#), a Dallas program that assists elderly and disabled homeowners with exterior home repairs.

Students labored on site from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day, with nights reserved for worship, prayer and reflection, Edwards said.

Shelley Nixon, volunteer coordinator for People Helping People, said World Changers always makes a tremendous contribution to the city, the value of their work totaling into thousands of dollars.



Taylor Bland, 14, paints fascia board above the garage of a home in Dallas during a World Changers project. (PHOTOS/Grace Gaddy)

“The only thing we do is provide the materials, and they provide the manpower. So, it actually helps in costs (for) the homeowners, because they’re getting all of this, of course, free of charge—they’re not charged a penny for this work to be done on their homes,” Nixon said.

Ruby Brisby, a Dallas homeowner, expressed heartfelt gratitude for the students’ willingness to serve.

“I wish the best for those kids. I really do,” she said. “They did something they did not have to do. ... And they stayed here until they finished. They weren’t running around—they were working.”

Brisby bought water and Gatorade to give to students while they worked. She also enjoyed fellowshipping with each one, she said.

“It’s very seldom you run across kids that sweet this day and time,” she noted. “When they got ready to go, they all came out and hugged me and made an 81-year-old woman feel nice. ... They prayed with me, and anytime they got ready to eat their lunch, (they would say) ‘Come on, Miss Ruby, come on and eat lunch with us.’”



Brian Pierce, who serves as World Changers worksite supervisor and the project coordinator in Corpus Christi, brought a youth group to Dallas to serve in low-income neighborhoods. (PHOTOS/Grace Gaddy)

Brisby called their work “a blessing,” adding that her house now looks “bright and clean.” In addition to the newly renovated home, the students also gave her “a brand new Bible” with a signed group picture of the crew enclosed, she said.

“I wouldn’t get rid of that picture for nothing in the world,” she said, adding she plans to frame it and hang it on the wall. “I’m saving it for

myself.”

Challenged each day to “live out their faith,” students sought to paint a picture of Christ’s love while painting and repairing homes. Greeting onlookers, a street view of the project yielded a bus, lumber, tools, paint cans and a sign crediting World Changers for the free labor—and of course, a crew of happy paint-splattered teenagers hammering, sawing and working.

“You kind of stand out, and the people in the neighborhood come by and say, ‘What are you guys doing here?’ And you’re able to tell them what your doing there, and it gives you an opportunity to witness,” Edwards said.

He recalled one woman, Tina, who rode by the worksite on a bicycle every day until someone invited her to share lunch. As friendships developed, a female volunteer led Tina to the Lord. When he asked her at the end of the week what had happened, she testified of Jesus and of “being clean” for the first time in her life.

Edwards also recounted a group of elementary-aged children who indicated commitments to follow Christ. All of this took place at just one of the 18 work sites, he said.

Edwards added this happens all the time.

“This is like no other event,” he said. “The fact that you’re working hands-on to earn a hearing, and you’re able to affect an entire neighborhood, and people know why you’re there—I think that’s why students love it.”