Students from ECSU are making a difference

By MICHELLE FIRESTONE
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WINDHAM — For Eastern Connecticut State University students, Windham is more than the town they go to college in.

It is also their “home away from home.” Eastern students demonstrated their commitment to the community by participating in community service activities as part of “Connecticut Public Higher Education Make A Difference Week,” which ends today.

Throughout the week, students volunteered at several community events and other activities in the Windham area.

“It’s been going great,” said Kimberly Armstrong-Silcox, director of the Center for Community Engagement at Eastern. “We’ve had lots of volunteers going out.”

Today, known as “National Make a Difference Day,” Eastern students will participate in “Malloween,” a Halloween event at the Eastbrook Mall in Mansfield, and the “Trick or Trunk” event at the Mansfield Community Center.

Other events Eastern students volunteered at include “Relay for Life” last weekend and the “Read for the Record” program at the Kramer building Thursday.

Others volunteer on a weekly basis at 30 different sites, including the No Freeze Hospitality Center in Willimantic, St. Joseph’s Living Center in Columbia and the Windham Area Interfaith Ministry in Willimantic.

Armstrong-Silcox noted about 500 students are involved in community service programs each year through her office.

“It’s an opportunity for them to really get to know the community that they’re going to be living in for four years and to get them engaged (in civic activity),” she said.

Eastern has received several national honors for its community service programs.

Recently, the university was awarded a Carnegie Foundation award for the first time and it has been placed on the “President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll” several times.

Armstrong-Silcox said Eastern recently received an award from the Windham Regional Community Council and another from the Eastern Connecticut Conservation District for its community service programs.

She said it is beneficial for Eastern students.

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Antuanett Ortiz, an Eastern Connecticut State University freshman from Hartford, helps Daniel Serralta, 4, during ‘Read for the Record’ at Kramer Gym Thursday morning. Ortiz was one of many ECSU students who fanned out over the area this week as part of ‘Connecticut Public Higher Education Make A Difference Week.’ Some students volunteer throughout the year on a weekly basis at 30 different sites, including the No Freeze Hospitality Center in Willimantic, St. Joseph’s Living Center in Windham, Beckish Senior Center in Columbia and the Windham Area Interfaith Ministry in Willimantic.

Eastern Connecticut State University volunteer Joe Franke demonstrates how to exercise by touching your toes to this group of W. B. Sweeney Elementary School students Friday afternoon. “It’s been going great,” said Kimberly Armstrong-Silcox, director of the Center for Community Engagement at Eastern. “We’ve had lots of volunteers going out.”
ECSU students are making a difference

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It provides students with opportunities to try out a major or a career to see if it’s something they’re really going to be interested in,” said Armstrong-Silcox.

Eastern freshmen Gemmy Moreno is a child psychology major who volunteered during the “Read for the Record” event Thursday.

It was the 10th annual Jumpstart event, during which State Rep. Susan Johnson, D-Willimantic, and Superintendent of Schools Patricia Garcia read “Not Norman” to children.

Moreno, of New Britain, participated in the event as a member of the Eastern chapter of JumpStart.

Jump Start is a national early education organization through which college students work with preschool children in low-income neighborhoods. Moreno said being involved in Jumpstart has been good preparation for her future career in child therapy.

Read for the Record, she said, went well and the children were engaged in the activities, which included creating a paper fish bowl and a matching game. “Kids, especially at this age, need more individualized attention,” Moreno said.

It was also good preparation for Mariana Vega, a sophomore from New London who was also volunteered at “Read for the Record.”

Vega, another Jumpstart member, is a social work major and hopes to become a social worker.

While volunteering, she said she has worked with all different age groups in the past but preschoolers “are definitely my favorite.”

“They seemed really happy to be here and energetic,” Vega said.

Vega said her parents have inspired her to do community service work. “I’ve always loved volunteering and helping out whenever I can,” she said.

Approximately 70 ECSU students participated in the “Interschool Walk for Warmth” at Windham’s five elementary schools Friday, including the Barrows Stem Academy.

“It’s a precursor event for WAIM’s Walk for Warmth,” said Emily Cameron, an Americorps Vista volunteer at Eastern’s Center for Community Engagement.

WAIM’s annual event, which raises money for its energy assistance program, will be Nov. 22.

Cameron noted that Eastern is a public liberal arts university.

“In my opinion, community service is one of the best ways to apply that motto,” Cameron said.

Samone Jones-McCarthy, a senior political science major, said she has been volunteering at Sweeney Elementary with Girl’s Circle. Girls Circle is an after-school program designed to give girls a space to share their feelings.

While working at “Walk for Warmth” at Sweeney, Jones-McCarthy, of Willimantic, said she likes working with children and making a “fingerprint on their lives. College is a part of the community, so you might as well get involved,” she said.

Daisy Garcia, a senior business administration major from Waterford, the “Walk for Warmth” event at Sweeney was a program for Noble Hall, where she is a resident assistant.

The activity, she said, allows the students to “bond and make more friends,” as well as exercising by participating in activities like running laps around the gym.

“I feel like we can make a difference in kid’s lives,” said Garcia.