ECSU students take pride in Willimantic
Volunteers help clean up the town

By ANDY REES
Special to the Chronicle

WILLIMANTIC — Clad in blue T-shirts and gaudy sunglasses, hundreds of Eastern Connecticut State University students assembled on campus for a decade-long tradition: Town Pride, Town Wide.

Raised from their dorm rooms at 8:30 a.m., student volunteers tackled various clean-up projects around town with the aim of beautifying and improving areas identified by town officials, the Chamber of Commerce and other local organizations.

"Each year, we have one or two big projects," said Diane Nadeau, president of the Chamber of Commerce Inc., Windham Region. "There are about 15 to 20 job sites around town."

This year, the focus was on projects in Lauter Park.

"A lot of places have the town versus gown tension," said Sally Milias, director of Grow Windham, a local organization devoted to promoting access to healthy, fresh food and one of the event's organizers. "But Eastern is a real partner in the community."

Milias, her Grow Windham interns and dozens of student volunteers were up to their knickers in mulch, compost and manure as they cleaned up the Windham Area Interfaith Ministry community garden on the side of a hill in Lauter Park.

(Study, Page 4)
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(Continued from Page 1)

“These volunteer workdays are wonderful,” said Milius, in between yelling bits of encouragement at the ECSU students as they put trowel to soil. “The infusion of energy allows us to take big steps.”

The community garden not only has individual plots, but it also provides space for growing fresh vegetables for local food kitchens — amounting to nearly 1,000 pounds of fresh produce a year.

“We’ll probably have spinach, broccoli, radishes,” said A.J. Bonetti, an intern at Grow Windham and student at ECSU who was supervising his first cleanup of the community garden.

Bonetti said he sees the Town Pride, Town Wide event as an important part of his time at ECSU.

“Being outdoors is a great way to get involved with something that matters,” Bonetti said.

Down the hill from the community garden, a team of 50 students tore into the rocky soil as they planted a variety of shrubbery along the banks of the Natchaug River under the supervision of representatives from the Eastern Connecticut Conservation District.

“There’s not a lot of vegetation along here,” said Judy Rondeau, ECCD’s natural resource specialist and designer of the river bank project.

More than 200 shrubs were purchased by the district and 100 were donated.

These new plants will help stem soil erosion and reduce water pollution caused by runoff from precipitation.

“It’s not a bad day to be out and about,” said Cooper D’Ambrosio, co-captain of the ECSU soccer team, as his teammates got their hands dirty planting blueberry bushes and perennials along the bank.

D’Ambrosio insisted this was not some sort of “mandatory fun.”

Instead, he said, it was a good opportunity for him and his fellow teammates to get out and support the community.

The free lunch from Cafémantic for volunteers was just an added bonus.