

Volunteers Provide Valuable Service to the City of Huntington

They've planted trees, painted storage sheds, and pulled trash from the river.

Sounds like a good day of work in the back yard, right?

Only in this case, they're working in the greater back yard of their community, helping to maintain and improve what we have — and expand the opportunities for families and visitors to make memories while enjoying what Huntington has to offer.

“It's been a heck of a ride,” says Andrew Rensberger community engagement volunteer coordinator for the City of Huntington. Rensberger has spent the past three years connecting people who want to help with community projects that could use the help.

At first, Rensberger spent his time explaining community volunteerism to churches, businesses, and service clubs, looking for people willing to tackle long-neglected projects throughout the city.

Now, with those initial projects complete and more residents aware of the opportunities, Rensberger has been able to expand his focus to include more event-oriented activities and projects tailored to fit individuals and families.

The first community volunteer project, and one of the most popular, is the cleanup of the Little River within the city limits. It's been so successful, Rensberger says, that three separate cleanup sessions were held last year, with some 150 volunteers helping pull trash out of the river.

Over three years, he says, volunteers have pulled 10 tons of debris out of the Little River between the Broadway Street bridge to the Forks of the Wabash. The next river cleanup, a project that was initially suggested by a resident, is set for late July.

Those 150 volunteers who pulled trash out of the Little River last summer are just a fraction of the 5,947 volunteers who spent a total of 19,366 hours working on 158 projects, events, and programs throughout the city in 2018.

Independent Sector, a national organization of nonprofits, foundations, and corporations, estimates that an hour of a volunteer's labor is worth \$22.69. Using that figure, local volunteers provided the City of Huntington with \$439,414.54 worth of work last year.

That's more than \$400,000 that didn't have to be raised through taxes, Rensberger points out.

The volunteers have helped out with the Daddy-Daughter and Mother-Son events, Fall Festival and Great Pumpkin Hunt; set up Christmas lights at Sunken Gardens; planted trees, watered flowers, and weeded gardens; painted, cleaned, and more.

Public art projects got underway with concerts and a Chalk Walk and will expand in 2019 as more organizations and volunteers come on board.

Sometimes, people can help out without really lifting a finger. That's the case with the Park and Trail Patrol, where volunteers who regularly use parks and trails just keep an eye out for anything broken or unusual, then report it.

Families can adopt a flower bed and make an outing of keeping that bed weeded, watered, and generally in good shape.

Rensberger now finds volunteers with a “public shout out” on social media, the city website, and newspapers. People already involved draw in their family members and friends.

“Once the first group starts participating, it really catches fire,” Rensberger says.

Anyone can contact the mayor's office to get involved, or get in touch with Rensberger directly at andrew.rensberger@huntington.in.us.

Volunteers don't need to be residents of the City of Huntington. In fact, a group of church youth from Franklin, Kentucky, was in town for a few days last summer and called looking for a community service project. Rensberger put them to work planting trees, painting, and doing some trail maintenance.

“Now we have people from a different community seeing how great our community is,” Rensberger says.

The volunteer program has an even greater impact closer to home, Rensberger says. The work done by volunteers can improve neighborhoods, increase home prices, and enhance quality of life.

“The entire community benefits,” he says. “The volunteers have a personal investment in it, and they're saving taxpayer dollars.”