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Friday, August 24, 2007

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Kenelle Hughley, 21, gets to work.

Ben Montgomery Jr.

Neal Rubin

## Owen Academy all shiny and like new



Kenelle Hughley is not a dirt-under-her-fingernails sort of girl, but she appreciated the impact of what the volunteers were doing. She especially appreciated it once she saw the bin full of work gloves.

Hughley, 21, was one of two dozen student managers from the residence life department at the University of Detroit Mercy who set out a few mornings ago to make Owen Academy a nicer place to be a school kid.

This was true grass-roots activism. Also flower roots, weed roots and tree roots, with some painting thrown in. And it was a

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picture-perfect illustration of how much good can be done with a few hours, a few tools and a few willing hands, no matter how nicely manicured.

"At first," Hughley confessed, "I wasn't excited." Once she realized that her French-manicured nails would be protected, though, she grabbed a metal rake and began to tug the weeds and debris from a 6-by-6-foot planter.

Some things are worth a potential chip in your polish, and the school at Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks boulevards in Detroit ranked as one of them.

"It makes a difference," said Hughley of Shaker Heights, Ohio, "when you see your school and you walk in and it looks better." The teachers notice, too.

### Teacher spearheads cleanup

Charise Fulton, 55, has 35 years in the classroom, but this will be her first fall at what's officially known as Owen Academy at Pelham. She is not shy and not easily discouraged: At one school, her car was stolen 11 times.

Fulton thought the courtyard and front hallway at Owen looked worn out, which is a polite way of saying dumpy. So when she ran into someone from Greening of Detroit at a social event, she asked for help.

Greening of Detroit, which spreads improvement and shrubbery wherever it goes, said of course. A landscape architect it works with, Jeff Klein, sketched out some plans. A van showed up with heaps of rakes, shovels, brooms, pruners and even pickaxes.

Fulton found some free perennials and wood chips online, caded bags of mulch from the woman who maintains her subdivision in Farmington Hills, and tapped her own wallet for paint, brushes and rollers. Greening of Detroit diverted the students from a garden project they'd signed up for, and everything came together on the only dry morning of the week.

### 'This school is a gem'

Owen has 400 students in kindergarten through 8th grade, with plenty of room for more. "We want people to know we're service-oriented and customer friendly," said principal Deborah Hunter-Harvill, and if that's not enough of a draw, how about the swimming pool and the bright new play structure?

"This school is a gem," Fulton said. It just needs a little polishing, and the entrance seemed like the place to start.

While part of the UDM crew dealt with vegetation, the rest attacked the fading institutional orange doors and adjoining woodwork inside. By mid-afternoon, the change was startling.

Three large pots of bright yellow flowers sat at the rear of the courtyard. Greenery glistened in planters, the colors vivid against fresh wood chips. The metal frames on cement benches were scraped and repainted, bushes were trimmed, and the doors were a soothing mauve taupe.

The lattice-style woodwork had bright blue panels set into clean white frames. There were traces



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of white on the blue, and OK, there were a few dabs of blue on the white. But the littler kids won't even notice, and the bigger kids will know somebody cared.

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