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MLK Day: WVU students help revive West Side

By Mackenzie Mays

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- A group of West Virginia University students, escorted by police and firefighters, went door-to-door in Charleston's West Side on Monday, offering free fire alarms, carbon monoxide detectors and door and window alarms that would alert residents of intruders.

Among them was Hope Bias, an immunology and microbiology major from Parkersburg, who had read about the recent initiatives targeting the historically crime-ridden neighborhood, and hopped on the chance to volunteer in the area.

"I'm very happy to be here and helping out with the revitalization as much as I can," Bias said. "It seems like it's all good work."

Bias' group, which focused on the Charleston police and fire departments' "Safe and Secure" program, was among about 100 WVU students who traveled to Charleston for a day of community service in recognition of Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

Students teamed up with the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, Goodwill and other organizations to help Charleston residents as part of the West Side Revive project, which aims to rebuild the impoverished community, reform its schools and curb drug-related crime.

"Despite all that, there's a spirit that's sweeping this community," Rev. Matthew Watts, leader of the revitalization project, told WVU volunteers at Grace Bible Church before they dispersed to their service sites.

Chelsea Sayta, a Pittsburgh resident studying social work at WVU, said looking out for the safety and security of others was the perfect way for her to celebrate MLK Day.

"This is what I love doing. This is what I want to do with my life," Sayta said. "So, I'm really glad I had the opportunity. I'm glad we're here."

Monday's trip was sponsored by WVU's Department of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, and David Fryson, the university's Chief Diversity Officer, said there's no better time for the university to have its first "on the ground" experience with the project than on MLK Day.

"The King family a few years ago said they're uncomfortable with the King Day being the day off... and so their initiative was to have MLK Day be a day on rather than a day off. Because of our commitment to the West Wide, we decided that would be our target," Fryson said.

Fryson said that WVU will continue to be an entity "running alongside" the West Side project, and he wants to keep the focus on the community leaders who have been working toward this for decades.

"So often, large institutions come in and then the people who have been working on the ground kind of get pushed aside. Then what happens is when the large institutions are no longer doing it, then the infrastructure goes," he said. "In all of our efforts, I'm trying to make sure that it's understood that there are community efforts there -- that they are the focal point, and we're there as a resource whether that's an educational resource or physically helping."

Charleston Fire Department Capt. Ken Tyree helped students pass out safety equipment on Monday and even installed fire alarms for those who needed assistance.

The key, Tyree said, is to allow days of service like these to motivate ongoing efforts in the community.

"We need to be doing it at least four times a year so that you can really impact the community," Tyree said. "If you do it on a continuous basis, you can provide an extra degree of safety for these residents."

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