

Teens tackle blight at Woodland's Willow Spring Elementary school

By **JAMES NOONAN / Daily Democrat**

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Local teenagers, volunteering through the Woodland Coalition for Youth, work to clean up the site of the now defunct Willow Spring Elementary School at the corner of E. Gibson Road and Bourn Drive. Clean up efforts were scheduled to be ongoing from Monday through Wednesday. (James Noonan/ Democrat)

Every day, motorists entering Woodland from the Gibson Road exit of Highway 113 are greeted by a terrific example of urban blight developing at the former site of Willow Springs Elementary School.

Since last June, when the \$7 million in district cuts forced the school's closure, weeds and shrubbery have grown out of control, lawns gone unmowed and several of the building's windows had been broken by vandals. Now, thanks to a concerned

group of Woodland youths, something is finally being done.

"For a lot of these kids, it's a matter of civic pride," said Izabelle Ponce, a youth engagement leader with the Woodland Coalition for Youth. "When you come into Woodland from Davis, or even San Francisco, this is the first thing you see of our community, and they're not happy with that."

Ponce explained that, during the month of June, five teenagers from the Woodland community took part in the Outdoor Youth Connection program, a three-day leadership camp sponsored by the California State Parks Foundation and the Pacific Leadership Institute, a San Francisco-based non-profit organization.

As part of their experience, participants were charged with the task of returning to their communities and organizing a service opportunity for at least 25 of their peers.

Ponce, along with Anselmo Morales, also from the Woodland Coalition for Youth, explain that the students chose the task of cleaning up the Willow Springs site because many of them had attended the school when

they were younger and were dissatisfied with the way it had deteriorated over the past year.

Prior to its closure in 2009, Willow Spring Elementary School had been educating Woodland's young people for just under 70 years.

Ponce also noted that the majority of students participating in the clean up already had community service experience totaling well over the 40 hours required for graduation at both Pioneer and

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Woodland high schools.

One such student, Elyse Chamberlain, 15, explained that her desire to serve the Woodland community was based on much more than simply trying to satisfy an hour requirement.

"Helping the community is really fun for me, and I get a really good feeling when I'm doing it," she said. "Plus it's sad to see the school so messed up."

Chamberlain, who was able to complete more than 100 hours of community service in her freshman year alone, was one of the five students who attended the Outdoor Youth Connection program, and said that the experience only added to her desire to serve the community.

Volunteers were on hand throughout the better part of this week, working from roughly 8 a.m. until noon from Monday until Wednesday. After several days of toiling for the good of the community, Ponce said the volunteers would be treated to a celebratory swim day at Woodland High School's Charles Brooks Swim Center in Thursday.

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