

Graffiti cleanup 'helps us give back'

Mainstream clients keep city cleaner, with United Way help

Posted By DON FRASER , STANDARD STAFF

Posted 1 day ago

They are waging a small but effective battle in the war against graffiti.

About three times a month, Kelly Hallett and Steve Wedlake put in a graffiti-removal shift in St. Catharines.

On this day, the Mainstream clients don rubber gloves, goggles, masks and reflector vests.

With determined looks, they remove paint and marker tags that cover a Canada Post box at Niagara and Church streets.

Wedlake pulls out a spray bottle and rubs solution onto the squiggles. A few minutes later, Hallett scrubs it all away.

Each job can take from 10 minutes to two hours to complete.

Hallett, 29, said the work, which pays minimum wage, lets her "get out of the house more often.

"And the other thing is I get paid," she said with a broad smile.

For Wedlake, 48, "It gives us great experience and helps us give back to what Mainstream has done for us.

"We get fresh air, get to meet people. We hear their responses -- that they're thankful for the job we're doing," Wedlake said.

The two are among nine developmentally challenged people who are part of Mainstream's new graffiti-removal program.

[This year, the initiative received \\$10,400 in funding from the United Way of St. Catharines and District.](#)

Mainstream, based in St. Catharines, has more than 240 Niagara residents who use its services.

It helps the developmentally challenged by providing life skills and employment- training programs, while promoting independence and community integration.

Its graffiti-removal program is in partnership with the City of St. Catharines, Canada Post, Cogeco and the Niagara Regional Police.

Right now, graffiti-removal projects cover Cogeco and Canada Post property such as relay and post boxes.

About 800 sites have already been cleaned.

"As an organization, we were trying to find an innovative way to benefit the community and the participants from Mainstream," said Kristine Akilie, Mainstream's spokeswoman.

"We recognized there was a gap in service for graffiti removal and this certainly met a need," Akilie said.

"It gives people new job skills ... and it promotes community integration, which is our vision and focus for the people we support."

Dianne MacGillivray, a job-readiness coach with Mainstream, said the graffiti-removal workers are proud of their jobs and enjoy the public praise they receive.

"We've had people drop off coffees or pop and give thanks for what we've given back to the community," MacGillivray said.

Clients learn job skills such as punctuality, responsibility, communications and working on a team, she said.

Their salary, though modest, also means more financial independence.

Akilie said United Way funding for this initiative is one-time only.

Should money continue coming from other sources, the program will expand to include City of St. Catharines parks and recreational equipment.

"Down the road, we'll also look to partnering with other agencies, so we can provide this service throughout Niagara," Akilie said.

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All graffiti reports in St. Catharines should go to the graffiti hotline, 905- 688-5601, ext. 3115