

Paul Fritz

From: Frank DiPlacido
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By [Steven Marroni](#)
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NORTH EAST - A dark, trash-filled alley is getting a face-lift.

And community-minded students are doing the dirty work.

A few coats of paint, some plants and greenery and hard work by the Community Kids Alley Project is reviving the alley running between buildings at the corner of South Lake and West Main streets in North East.

About 10 youths in the Career Alternative Education Program (CAEP) are spending many of their Saturdays with staff members cleaning the alley.

"It was all overgrown and full of garbage," said Frank DiPlacido, program supervisor.

Students from the program did some painting and cleaning last year, but the weather did not permit many Saturdays of work.

"Now we're cleaning up the damage from the winter," DiPlacido said. "There has been a lot of dumping and graffiti."

With a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, CAEP sought out worthy projects in the area. The chamber suggested the alley. It was once known for graffiti, vandalism and being an eyesore in general.

Students and CAEP staff are refurbishing the alley with window boxes, planters, a cobblestone pathway and a paint job depicting grapevines growing up the sides of the buildings.

CAEP, an alternative education program for sixth- through ninth-graders, is a combined effort of Erie County Technical School and Sarah A. Reed Children's Center. Students having trouble keeping on track at a regular school can be referred to the program, which offers hands-on learning in a therapeutic setting.

For DiPlacido, a trashy alley makes for fine therapy. He hopes students will be proud of beautifying an area blighted by broken windows, smashed pipes and mangled wire screens. He also hopes they learn vandalism hurts the community.

The alley project is a community service project beyond the regular CAEP courses. The alley project is also open to students who have been expelled or are in some other trouble to give them a chance to reinvest in the community and learn to respect others' property, DiPlacido said.

DiPlacido and two staff members spent a recent morning preparing the alley for students to work

on. They hosed away graffiti with a power sprayer and washed away muck. They also swept and bagged up garbage and hauled it away.

"I think it's a wonderful project," said CAEP instructor Dan Baney. "It's about the kids giving back and the community seeing the kids in a positive light."

Another boon of the program is to have students working - and to have community members notice their good deeds.

"It gives them structured weekends," said Rodney Probst, lead behavior counselor for CAEP.

"I'm hoping the community will have a positive response to it," said Diana Hatfield of the North East Chamber of Commerce, which is co-sponsoring the project. "The kids are using their skills, and we hope they're learning that it doesn't take much to scar a building. Community property is valuable to everyone."

While students finish their work, parking will be restricted in the alley. Besides being a walkway, the alley will continue to serve as an emergency passage for smaller firetrucks and ambulances.

Lisa Krzyzkowski, owner of Here's to Your Health, Mind and Body at 3 W. Main St., is glad students are sprucing up an eyesore.

"I just hope what they do will be taken care of and not get trashed," Krzyzkowski said. "I hope it stays nice."

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