

*For immediate release*

## **Faith, community service and arts merge to help Allendale residents**

By Laura J. McKenzie

When does faith, community service, economic development and the arts merge? It did so February 17-26 in Allendale.

Allendale Enterprise President Lottie Lewis, who is also Allendale County's Arts Maven, coordinated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of South Carolina to invite 72 teenagers, their chaperones and contractors from Connecticut on a mission trip to upgrade several homes in Allendale, install playground equipment at Emma's House and make a positive impact on the community.

"The arts are about making our surroundings beautiful and beneficial. One key in economic development is how a community looks - not only on the surface but deep down," said Lewis. "The challenge is having the funds and the manpower to do the projects that are needed."

"God sent us a band of angels," she said.

By working with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of South Carolina, local sponsor Allendale First Baptist Church and the Connecticut volunteers, homes of several elderly residents were made nicer and safer. Work included replacing roofs, building wheelchair ramps, minor landscaping, painting interiors and some exteriors, and other minor repairs. "We didn't have to spend a penny," said Lewis. "They brought all the tools and materials with them."

The teens are part of a youth group called "YG" from Congregational Church in New Canaan, Connecticut. They flew to South Carolina and were housed at Camp Jackson located between Allendale and Barnwell. The Finicky Bean, an Allendale company, catered their meals.

The teens were divided into "teams" of 12 to 15 who were assigned to specific projects along with two team leaders and a contractor.

"A key part of Jesus' ministry when he was on Earth was service and serving those who were less fortunate," said Lauren Carlson as her team was tearing into a leaking porch roof. "We feel called as Christians to continue his mission and to come as we are able, serving communities that need the resources and are more vulnerable. We are doing the work we can."

One of Carlson's teammates, Ryan Whitman, 15, said, "It's a great opportunity to get out of my home and experience something I've never experienced before, to see how others are living." She said the work is helping her with her faith journey. "I have made so many friends and feel I am making an impact."

Lewis said improvement efforts are "contagious".

"As residents see their neighbor's home improve, they start doing projects to upgrade and beautify their own property. Pretty soon, everything starts to look better," she said. "They use their creativity and personal touch – their artistic approach – to improving their homes, businesses and surroundings."

Sisters Sarah McDuffie, 75, and Gloria Drayton, 72, share a home on Railroad Avenue built by their father in 1944. They were both born and reared in the homestead but moved away when they married. Widowed, Drayton returned to the home around 1980 and was later joined by her sister.

While they are still living independently, major repairs and yardwork are beyond their physical abilities.

"This means everything to us," said McDuffie. "We are so happy to have such a nice group. Thank God for the volunteers. Words cannot express how happy we are."

"This is a blessing from the Lord," said Drayton "I am most thankful and want to praise Lottie and her husband, Frank, for their efforts."

Gloria Harvey's porch was leaking badly and caused rot in the roof. The volunteers worked from the top down to remove old roofing material, make repairs and replace the shingles. The water was also causing a ramp to rot.

"I couldn't stand on my porch without getting wet," said Harvey, 75, watching the volunteers working on her Dale Street home. "I was also afraid someone would get hurt on that ramp."

Since the ramp had been installed for the needs of her now-deceased husband, the volunteers were tasked with removing it, building stairs and a railing for Harvey.

"I am so blessed by this assistance," she said.

Abby Richardson and Travis Sturcke, both 17, rolled up their sleeves at Harvey's home.

"We came into Charleston and got to see the Atlantic Ocean. That was pretty cool," said Richardson. "We love our homeowner, Gloria. We are praying for her family now. Doing this work is really empowering."

Sturcke was grateful for the warm weather as daytime temperatures hovered in the upper 70's. "It is so much better than Connecticut right now," he said with a laugh.

Sturcke has also seen how the work can impact not only the homeowners but also the volunteers. "Ever since I was in sixth grade my siblings have been involved in this and this has really made them a lot happier. This is my third mission trip so far and every year I am growing a little bit closer to God."

Emma's Helping Hands House, owned by the non-profit organization Allendale Enterprise, is a place for children to play and learn after school. The colorful playground equipment was purchased by the Congregational Church and the some of the volunteers put it together while others landscaped the surrounding area. "We want our children to get

fresh air and move their bodies," said Lewis. "The playground gives them a place to have fun and get exercise at the same time."

They also picked up trash and helped Cora Berry at Christ Central to organize clothing at the church's thrift store.

Vernia Gadson, 80, watched from her porch as the volunteers raked the yard while others applied stain on a wooden wheelchair ramp. "This has been a blessing from the Lord who knew I needed help," said Gadson. "All the children have been so smart and so respectful."

Gadson said she likes seeing homes look like they did when she was a child. "That was when Savannah River (Site) came and people were employed. They were able to keep things going (and looking nice)," she said.

Belle Dunlap, 17, and Sophie Austin, 18, were among the teens working on Gadson's home. "It's nice to give back to the people and continue what God wants us to do," said Austin when asked why she was a part of the project. Dunlap responded that she thinks "it's a good thing to leave the town that you've grown up with. It's a breath of fresh air to see how other people are living."

The biggest impact on the girls has been the gratitude of the homeowners to the volunteers. "Even if it is so little, like painting the house, it makes me want to continue helping," said Austin.

Mother and daughter neighbors Marjorie and Annie Splawn were also among those whose homes received upgrades by the teens. "We are really going to miss them. They have been wonderful," said Marjorie.

Volunteers and homeowners came together Friday, Feb. 25 to share a final meal and give testimony to the work that had been done. They were also entertained by soloist Nate Hartley.

It was a merging of souls with a lasting impact.