Mokuaika cleanup helps kids give back

On small island that has seen better days, kids help — and learn

BY MARY KAYE RITZ
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It sounded like fun and games at the beach, but the teens spending the hottest part of a Saturday at the ancient Hawaiian fishpond at Mokuaika, the island off Sand Island, were not having fun.

Those trudging through the muddy waters to reach land stepped a little more gingerly than the sailors they were helping to clear the passageway to the fishpond. The group split in half to help clear mangroves from the perimeter of the fishpond. One group grabbed loppers — tools that look like oversized scissors — to chop down the mangroves, while the younger ones dragged the debris to the nearby beach landing, where it was hauled away later.

The island becomes a catch-all for junk washing up from the Wai'ki side of Oahu, but that didn’t stop the dedicated band of young people and their PACT leaders from digging into the debris at hand.

“When the ‘ana gives to you, cleaning up is like giving back,” said Kaele Kekaha Kauhui, a 16-year-old.

Kee Kuilima, a 16-year-old, made the trip from Farrington High, has been involved since the PACT group began its Mokuaika project many moons ago.

Kee surveyed the progress made, recalling the days when the rabbit and foliage were so thick, you couldn’t even see from one side of the island to the next.

“You couldn’t see the ocean,” said Kaele, pointing towards the island where the width and breadth of a school cafeteria.

“I gave a satisfied nod: ‘It turned out pretty good,”

The 18-year-old PACT program doesn’t just take field trips like these, of course. Director Cheryl Johnson said the program offers after-school refuge to more than 450 who live in or near low-income or public housing at two sites, including Kiihi Park Terrace and Wai’kiwai Momi.

Besides the cleanup, there are field trips — incentive trips for those who take part in study hall — that are all about fun and games. The Teen Program takes them to the water park, or out for pizza or ice skating.

Kee came up with the idea for this year’s teen event: a basketball court and a main room with a pool table, foosball and video game setup.

Here, students stop in after school to get their homework done during “power hour,” then can reward themselves with a snack. After that comes a bit of Rock Band or Guitar Hero video games, Mudden Football is also popular, but don’t expect to find it on "Painting, Page 2"
Cleanup

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violent games like Streetfighter.

There's also a computer lab to help with the homework or surf the 'Net, though there are strict rules about that. Plus, clubs meet there, too.

The first part of the afternoon has more activities for the younger set. By about 5 p.m., the older crowd moves in.

"On a regular afternoon, about 60 (students) come and go," Johnson said.

There were about half that at Molokai during the most recent field trip, however.

Back at the fishpond, a dreadlocked Christine Everett, who has served as program coordinator for 14 years, called to a young man with loppers to take a break. Half the tree came up the shore with him as Daniel Valna, 17, made his way to a tree stump to take a load off and chat.

No one who ever saw him would be surprised to learn that Daniel, a senior at Farrington, is a football player. Tight end. He's been at the Teen Program since he was 8.

It hasn't been easy to stay out of trouble for some of Daniel's pals. And a little trouble has found its way to him, too, on occasion, but the young Catholic who attends St. John the Baptist in Kailua has his parents is glad for the Teen Program.

"It's safe, and they help out a lot," he said.

And he's happy for the Saturday field trip: "I'd have nothing to do at home except clean house."

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Kathleen Labuguen, 13, of Kalii, at work on Moloka'i Island.