

COMMUNITY / Recruiting thousands - Leaders call for volunteers - JESSE JACKSON BACKS LOCAL SERVICE CORPS

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Author: Stephen Magagnini ; smagagnini@sacbee.com

Imagine a volunteer army of tens of thousands of Sacramentans fighting poverty, illiteracy, pollution, gangs and a range of other social ills.

Flanked by civil rights icon the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Mayor Kevin Johnson and state Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg on Monday announced plans to raise such an army.

Answering President Obama's national call to service, Johnson and Steinberg launched "Volunteer Sacramento," a yearlong campaign to recruit Sacramentans to teach, clean up the environment and work with needy Sacramentans of all ages.

Johnson said he expects to raise a corps of thousands of volunteers who -- at 10 to 100 hours apiece -- will donate between 350,000 and 500,000 hours this year.

"That's going to be \$7 to \$8 million of time we're going to give back to this community," Johnson told several hundred activists and community leaders at the Sacramento Boys & Girls Club at 1117 G St.

In recent weeks, 12,000 Sacramentans already have signed up to volunteer with Hands On Sacramento, a coalition of 360 community organizations and agencies, said director Kathy Chow.

Johnson invited Jackson to fire up the crowd, saying he has devoted "his whole life to those who don't have a voice."

The mayor, who has known Jackson for 15 years, invited him to Sacramento several months ago to help launch the campaign.

"Jesse was the first person he called," said spokesman Steve Maviglio, adding that Jackson had paid "his own way here out of his own pocket."

Jackson, a community organizer in Chicago for 40 years, touted volunteerism with his trademark rhymes and maxims. He got the audience to repeat:

"Children remember more where you took them than what you bought them.

"The best of us who help the rest of us are the most blessed of us," Jackson declared. "We can't all be well-known but we can all be great because we can serve ... you never know when the seeds you plant are going to germinate."

Jackson was at the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s side when he was assassinated in Memphis,

Tenn. Jackson ran unsuccessful campaigns for president in 1984 and 1988.

He called volunteering "the divine rule of reciprocity ... you cannot give without receiving, you cannot take without losing."

Volunteerism can take many forms, Jackson said: Mentoring, organizing, rebuilding, teaching and giving hope to those coming out of prison, those struggling with gangs and drugs, those who can't read and write.

One of those was Jackson's own grandmother, who was not going to vote for him for president "because she could neither read nor write. To go mark an X was embarrassing to her. She had so much wisdom and advice, and she was not going to give it. And somebody volunteered to help mark that X."

Jackson noted that Rosa Parks and Cesar Chavez were both volunteers, along with the Freedom Riders who helped desegregate voting in the American South.

Mayor Johnson said he learned volunteerism from his grandfather, a sheet-metal worker who would stop to help drivers whose cars had flat tires or ran out of gas.

Two days before Christmas one year, Johnson remembers his grandfather dragging him out of bed in the middle of the night, driving from Oak Park to the projects at Broadway and 5th Street, and telling him to ring a family's doorbell and give them \$20, "which seemed like \$200 back then."

"A lady opened the door and I handed her the \$20 and she starts crying," he said.

It wasn't until a few days later that Johnson learned the mother of eight had had all her kids' Christmas presents stolen. "It's not about what you say, it's about what you do," Johnson said.

In a meeting with The Bee's editorial board Monday afternoon, Jackson said he came to promote volunteerism because "I have not seen a city more into this than Sacramento ... Sacramento's big enough to be small and small enough to be big."

Jackson called Johnson Sacramento's "hometown hero" and cited a strong commitment by local nonprofits and churches. Jackson said he first volunteered at his church to help find shoes for children who didn't have them.

The need for volunteers as agents of social change remains stronger than ever, he said, because the nation still is facing serious structural inequality.

"Seventy percent of young black and brown boys are dropping out of schools," Jackson said. Of the 2.3 million Americans in jail, he said, "1 million are black and 500,000 are Latinos."

Obama's election shows "whites are maturing," and now understand that "irrational fears should not interfere with rational thinking," Jackson said.

"Barack is running the last lap of a 60-year race" and struggle for racial equality and civil rights, Jackson said.

"He's a strong runner and a smart runner, but we've gone from walls to bridges, and the demolition crew paid a big price to knock down those walls" -- the marchers and martyrs who went to jail and sometimes gave their lives.

At the Boys & Girls Club, Steinberg recalled there were always coaches, drama teachers, parents and other adults helping out in his San Francisco neighborhood.

"In these difficult times, we must make sure that everything that's good in our communities continues," Steinberg said.

"The greatest joy in life is volunteering, doing something, anything, to help others. The beauty of volunteerism is that nobody tells you what you have to do. You choose what to do."

HOW TO VOLUNTEER

Mayor Kevin Johnson has launched Volunteer Sacramento, a program for people to give back to their community. "Whether it's service or the environment or literacy, there is an opportunity that matches your passion and will fit into your schedule," said Kathy Chow, director of Hand On Sacramento. Here's how you can participate:

Sign up: Volunteers can sign up at www.handsonsacramento.org or by calling (916) 447-7063, extension 344.

Picking a project: Hands On Sacramento is a coalition of 360 nonprofits and agencies. Volunteers can search projects by date and ZIP code, and agencies will e-mail volunteers back with information on where, when, what, if there's a minimum age, and if you need to bring any tools.

Call The Bee's Stephen Magagnini, (916) 321-1072.

Caption: RENÉE C. BYER / rbyer@sacbee.com The Rev. Jesse Jackson discusses the importance of volunteerism during a speech Monday at the Sacramento Boys & Girls Club. Jesse Jackson is applauded following his speech on civic involvement Monday at Sacramento's Boys & Girls Club. "I have not seen a city more into this than Sacramento ... Sacramento's big enough to be small and small enough to be big," Jackson told The Bee's editorial board.

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