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Athletes working for a better world

Maccabi Games participants do community projects to enhance their experience while in the Akron area

By Bill Lilley
Beacon Journal staff writer

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Josh Feldman claims he has done some yardwork as a teenager in the Orlando suburb of Windermere.

But Josh had no clue as to what he held in his hands Wednesday afternoon as he moved earth under the State Street bridge in Akron.

Jacob Wladis, another member of the Team Orlando boys basketball team, didn't know what it was, either.

"It's a rakey thing," Jacob said.

OK, so the two teens weren't familiar with a McLeod — a tool with a large hoelike blade on one side and tined blade on the other.

It didn't really matter.

What was important was the fact that Josh, Jacob and more than 400 other athletes in this week's 2008 Akron JCC Maccabi Games were working hard to help improve the quality of life for area residents.

Wednesday afternoon's Day of Caring and Sharing has been a staple of the Maccabi Games, which have been held since 1982 in various cities around the country.

"It's a different part of the total experience of the Maccabi Games and I've had a great time," Josh said. "And I've learned a lot, too — both about people and about things.

"I didn't even know what a marble pit was until I came here this afternoon and started building this one.

"It's a great thing to know we're going to leave behind something for the people of Akron to enjoy long after we've left. It's really a great service project."

The two marble pits the athletes built were part of the Project Evergreen beautification project at Lock 3 Park, where the American Toy Marble Museum is located.

"The kids are doing a great job and they have no idea just how much they are contributing to Akron," said Cleveland Phil Fogerty, a member of the board of directors of the Minnesota-based Project Evergreen.

"Akron is our launching point to get the message out that communities are better off and provide a better quality of life with green space. It helps to capture allergens and make things cooler — and it just looks a lot better."

More than 150 of the Maccabi athletes did landscaping outside the Lock 3 Park building, painted walls and hung paintings inside, and painted the columns that support the State Street bridge with designs created by local artist Todd Volkner. Bocci and corn hole courts are to be added later.

"We wanted bright colors to catch people's attention and we wanted the paintings to flow," said Heather Rohrbaugh, a Summer Arts Experience artist who will be a junior at Kenmore High School. "It really looks a lot better under the bridge now."

Another 100 Maccabi athletes were taken to four Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority buildings — Fowler Apartments, Belcher senior living center and the two Saferstein towers — to provide companionship and exercise programs for the residents.

"These kids are athletes, and who better to teach the residents, especially the older ones, how to stretch and improve their quality of life by becoming more safe and more independent?" said Tammy Gersman, Jewish programming chairwoman for the Maccabi Games.

Still other Maccabi athletes went to Camp Y-Noah in Green, where they worked to improve trails and build a bog, and to Rex Lake Camp in New Franklin, where they participated in sports, cooking and arts and crafts with campers with special needs.

The afternoon concluded with all of the athletes back at Lock 3 Park, participating in a wrap-up session. They brought sports equipment that will be given to the Boys and Girls Club of the Western Reserve.

"It's just a great feel-good day for everybody," Gersman said. "Thinking of other people and giving back is a key part of our religion. All of the athletes did a great job doing exactly that."

Athletic competition in the Maccabi Games, which brought athletes ages 12 to 16 to Akron from around the country and from Israel and Hungary, concludes this morning with gold- and bronze-medal matches in basketball, soccer, tennis, golf and bowling. The lone day of track competition will be held at Lee Jackson Field at the University of Akron.

The final event will be a closing party from 5 to 9 p.m. today at the Shaw Jewish Community Center.

Bill Lilley can be reached at 330-996-3811 or blilley@thebeaconjournal.com.

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