Dozens volunteer in memory of Martin Luther King Jr.

By McLean Bennett
Leader-Telegram staff

It wasn't the same types of activities Martin Luther King Jr. was doing decades earlier, but Dave Morley hoped the volunteer work he and others did Monday would help augment, in some small way, the civil rights leader's legacy.

Morley stuck price tags on assorted items - a couple dumbbells, a brush, a pair of mittens - at Hope Gospel Mission's Bargain Center in Eau Claire. He was among dozens of others in the city who volunteered Monday to perform community service projects on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a federal holiday celebrated since 1986.

"We're having a good time here," Morley, a retired Eau Claire school district worker, said of the work he and a handful of others did at the bargain center, which sells donated goods on the city's west side. "Want a hockey puck?" he asked before sticking a 98-cent price tag on a black rubber disc.

Congress declared Martin Luther King Jr. Day a national day of service in 1994, calling on people to perform community service projects in honor of the civil rights leader who led protests against racial segregation in the 1960s.

About seven people helped sort and put price tags on donated items Monday at the bargain center, laboring amidst piles of spare bike tires, boxes of toys and row upon row of secondhand furniture. Dozens more volunteered in places elsewhere in the city.

"(Martin Luther King) was incredible for his sense of community and being able to pull people together," said Ann Watson, an AmeriCorps member at UW-Eau Claire who helped organize several university-affiliated projects Monday.

Watson said she anticipated between 45 and 50 volunteers would show up Monday to lend a hand with projects around the city. Some helped paint a wall inside the L.E. Phillips Senior Center; others helped sort through food donations at Feed My People Food Bank. A few more tackled miscellaneous jobs at various other locations.
UW-Stout and Mabel Tainter Center for the Arts hosted a ceremony honoring King in downtown Menomonie Monday night. Mary McManus, a UW-Stout employee familiar with the event, said the university considered the ceremony to be a service project, and she was unaware of any other King-related projects tied to the school. The ceremony included documentary films and a discussion about King, who was murdered in 1968 in Memphis, Tenn.

The Hope Gospel Mission Bargain Center sells secondhand clothing, toys, books, kitchen items and furniture, among various other knickknacks. Most of the profits help support homeless shelters in the city. People at the center refurbish and clean some items before putting them up for sale - tasks volunteers did Monday.

Volunteers in Eau Claire were expected to work into late afternoon, before attending a Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration that night at St. James the Greater Catholic Church.

"I think Martin Luther King was always concerned about people ..." Morley said as he sorted through boxes of donated items. "I think that going out and working on these service projects is about helping people, and that's what his message always was."

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