Students represent Gateway hilltowns at Project 351

Huntington –“I almost couldn’t breathe,” Shondelee Ortega from Chester said laughing, about what it felt like to realize she was sitting next to Governor Charlie Baker.

She and five other eighth-graders from Gateway Regional Middle School attended Project 351 on the Martin Luther King holiday, a statewide youth-led service initiative based in Boston. Victoria Kot from Russell, Sierra Russell from Blandford, Melinda Main from Middlefield, Amy Lafosse from Huntington, and Benjamin Hyjek from Montgomery were all selected by their teachers to attend the service event. The program convenes an eighth grader from every city and town in Massachusetts for a full day of team-based service across Boston with the hope that the students will bring service back to their own communities.

Project 351 is dedicated to celebrating youth leadership, inspiring the ethic of service, and honoring the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Students are selected by faculty and staff on the basis of an exemplary ethic of service, potential for leadership, and embodiment of the values of compassion, commitment, humility and kindness. Selecting unsung heroes is also encouraged by the program.

One of the unique experiences the students had was hearing Governor Baker speak. Baker attended the service projects and visited with students. While painting art for the Pine St. Inn Homeless Shelter, Governor Baker “stood over my shoulder and said ‘cool’,” Hyjek stated.

Students travelled to Boston with teachers Hannah Sullivan and Jenna Kakimoto. Once there, they were broken up into groups to work on community service projects such as painting safe rooms at Edwards Middle School, making well-wish cards and packaging hot cocoa jars and scarves for senior citizens, making Kids Packs for homeless and economically challenged children through Cradles to Crayons, painting murals for DCF (Department of Children and Families), and making thank-you cards to first responders.

Main was part of the Sullivan Group, which honored Captain Jay Sullivan who died in the Iraq War. Every ambassador in the group wrote a letter to his parents thanking their son for his service. “I felt like I was doing something not only for the community but also for his parents because we were representing their son”, Main stated.

“I felt really connected to people I didn’t even know”, said Lafosse. All of the ambassadors were astounded by the number of people they helped and couldn’t wait to come back to Gateway to do their part. The six students are planning on collaborating with Cradles to Crayons in the spring to do their own service project at Gateway.

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Photo (left to right): Shondalee Ortega, Victoria Kot, Sierra Russell, Melinda Main, Amy Lafosse and Ben Hyjek served as student ambassadors to Project 351 on January 16.