

Avondale makeover 'a real grand slam'

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Volunteers from the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden and P&G North America Marketing work on new landscaping around a new sign in front of Gabriel's Place.

AVONDALE — Ten-year-old John Clifford Jr. of the Avondale Angels baseball team had played on the old Hirsch Recreation Field, the one that turned into a paved parking lot in short right field.

On Thursday, after 400 volunteers descended on the ballfields, recreation center and the neighboring Gabriel's Place food ministry for a total makeover, John stood on the new diamond, surrounding by a new home-run fence, dugouts and backstop, and fired a ceremonial first-pitch strike to former Reds great Joe Morgan.

"Most Avondale kids have never played on a field this nice," said John, gripping the ball that Morgan had autographed for him. "Now this is our home field, and we get to play here whenever we want."

No detail appeared to be too small for the legion of volunteers who descended before 9 a.m. The majority of them blue-shirted employees of Procter & Gamble North America Marketing – joined by groups from the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center and the Reds Community Fund – split into 34 teams and went right to work to complete the 2013 Reds and P&G Community Makeover.

Some tasks already had been completed by contractors – home run fencing, regrading of infields, new backstops – on two baseball fields behind Hirsch. Zoo volunteers had begun installing new landscaping in front of Gabriel's Place, the former St. Michael's and All Angels Episcopal Church at 3630 Reading Road.

Volunteers dug holes for root sacks of large trees and small ones for plants. They attached screen fencing to cross posts with wiring. They installed permanent base foundations and pitching rubbers on the ball fields.

They scrubbed the inside of the Civil War-era church. They painted the basement recreation rooms at Hirsch, where new pool tables and other games would be placed. They started to build an expansion of the Gabriel's Place hoop house inside a new black iron fence that had been erected. They built tables and eight sets of bleachers.

The Reds Community Fund and Procter & Gamble chose Avondale out of 23 applications for their fourth annual makeover project. The Enquirer's "Saving Avondale" series, which began in March 2012, has featured Gabriel's Place, influenced the organizations' decision to work in Avondale, one of the city's more impoverished and troubled neighborhoods that has shown resilience and progress in recent years.

"I am so thankful for your presence this morning," said Ozie Davis, a lifelong Avondale resident and executive director of the Avondale Comprehensive Development Corporation. "Thanks ... for having faith

in us. Thanks for believing that in Avondale there is hope. Thanks for knowing that in Avondale there is love.”

Knothole Baseball’s District 1 covers 19 Cincinnati neighborhoods and has 600 players ages 4 through 15, about half of whom are from Avondale. District Supervisor De’Angelo Boynton said the new fields and commitment by the Reds and P&G will help District 1 move toward its goal of reaching 1,500 youths.

Gabriel’s Place is a food ministry created in 2011. And following the 3 p.m. opening ceremony, each volunteer received a \$5 voucher to spend on produce at the farmer’s market.

Gabriel’s Place is one of the most visible projects in a large-scale revitalization of Avondale. Nonprofit developer The Community Builders Inc. in December learned it had received a \$29.5 million, five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to renovate five distressed affordable housing projects on Reading Road in Avondale.

“I am overwhelmed by the hundreds and hundreds of people swarming the grounds this morning,” said Thomas Breidenthal, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio, which worked with the Avondale Community Council and other Avondale-based institutions, mainly the zoo and Cincinnati Children’s, to start the food ministry.

In Avondale, two out of five people live in poverty. Dropout and teen pregnancy rates are high, though violence is down.

Phil Castellini, Reds chief operating officer, addressed the volunteers on this, the fourth joint volunteer effort by the Reds and P&G.

“What we will have done at this address will be the coolest project we have done,” he said. “It will be a real grand slam.”

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