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PRICES MAY VARY OUTSIDE METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON AREA

## City Year's reputation attracts MLK helpers

**T**all, young and energetic, when Michael Stevens walks into a D.C. restaurant he is immediately recognizable by his red fleece jacket, signifying him as a member of the City Year corps.

"When kids see our jackets, they run up and say, 'Hey, City Year, I remember when you told us about STDs,' or 'City Year, I remember the skit for anti-drug education.' They are comfortable seeing a red jacket," said Mr. Stevens, 25, while preparing for the organization's Martin Luther King Day event. "And, it makes me feel good to know that they might not know me personally, but I know someone has been helped by one of our service projects."

City Year Washington, D.C., is among the community-service groups, here and nationwide, that will participate in Monday's "A Day On, Not a Day Off" volunteer activities to commemorate the slain civil rights leader's words and

deeds.

Granted, there is a lot of curious chatter about King's words flying across the political airwaves of late, but Mr. Stevens prefers to "transform" the slain civil rights leaders' "life and teachings into community service that helps solve social problems."

"I remember that Dr. King said, 'Everybody can be great because everybody can serve,'" said Mr. Stevens, who coordinates the King Service Day activities for City Year, which is based on U Street in Northwest.

Speaking of the U Street corridor, the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Birthday Celebration Committee is holding a series of events this weekend (most of them free), including a gala reception, a gospel concert, a prayer service and a wreath laying at the African-American Civil War Memorial on Monday.

The memorial site is familiar to Mr. Stevens and City Year, which kicked off its 10th



year in the District in September with a 70-member routine, I'm told, that could compete in any fraternity step show.

As members of City Year, people ages 17 to 24 receive a small stipend and commit to spending a year working full time in community service, leadership development and civic engagement in 17 locations nationwide and in South Africa. It is affiliated with the Voices for National Service coalition.

"City Year has a real good reputation of meeting the community needs and going above and beyond," Mr. Stevens said. Asked what City Year plans to do for King Day

this year, a harried Mr. Stevens, replied: "What aren't we doing?" before giving me a three-page list of team projects.

More than 550 volunteers are signed on to spruce up Roosevelt High School in Northwest, in part, by creating "inspirational murals." "If you put a wall mural that [students] are connected to, they are less likely to deface it," Mr. Stevens said.

Teams of volunteers — some from the Girl Scouts, the Catholic University football team, corporations and congressional representatives — will assist City Year members painting walls, building picnic tables and benches, upgrading a teacher's conference room and other areas of the aging Roosevelt building.

"I just found out that we may have a surprise team from a presidential campaign, but I don't know which one yet," Mr. Stevens said Wednesday, flashing a knowing smile.

— Anyone care to take a

guess? Last year, President Bush helped paint a D.C. school with City Year.

"He painted right beside everybody else," Mr. Stevens said. "Everybody's difference doesn't matter when you're doing service. We're all pushing Dr. King's dream."

"Maybe these are small steps that won't save the world, but they are steps in the right direction," he said. "Volunteers leave MLK Day service and feel like they really made a difference." Even though the group has enough registered volunteers, "who come out of the woodwork" for MLK Day, it needs volunteers for other projects throughout the year.

Meeting people from all cultures and backgrounds on service projects is what this native New Yorker finds most inspiring about working with City Year.

"There is a moment when everything clicks and you know I'm not alone in wanting to help people out," he said.

Mr. Stevens joined the ever-expanding City Year in 2006 after serving as a hurricane relief worker in New Orleans. He also worked for Habitat for Humanity, which eventually led him to his position in the District, which he said he really likes because "D.C. has soul."

Mr. Stevens, who now trains City Year members as well as manages the day-to-day operation of his team, discovered that he enjoyed working with his hands on the larger City Year community projects. He even joked that "I wish I had learned to be a carpenter like my dad." Eventually, Mr. Stevens said he sees himself returning to his community. "When my time is done, I feel like I have the tools to go home and change my neighborhood. I'm going to make a change like I wouldn't have made without City Year."

For more information about MLK Day weekend events, call James Speight at 202/345-4006.