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Nvidia's Christmas Party rejuvenates Overfelt High

By Pete Carey
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William C. Overfelt High School on San Jose's East Side swarmed with help beyond any school's wildest dreams Saturday as hundreds of volunteers from Silicon Valley chip company Nvidia descended for the purpose of giving the place a makeover.

They came bearing paint brushes, wheelbarrows, picks and shovels, hammers and saws and a dazzling array of computers for a new audiovisual lab, not to mention lunch and a deejay who blasted the campus with the strains of Earth, Wind and Fire, Santana and high-octane rap music.

They brought their spouses, and their older kids pitched in while the tykes did crafts in the art room.

By the end-of-the-day the tally: A new greenhouse for the science teacher contributed by Webcor; a new volleyball court; an audiovisual lab and multimedia classroom outfitted with powerful Apple iMac computers contributed by Nvidia and Adobe; a new computerized math and science learning center; 70 refurbished computers for the library; and three

murals, landscaping and many other improvements done by the volunteers, teachers and students.

"This is good," said Chief Executive Jen-Hsun Huang, surveying the milling Nvidians, teachers, students and parents. "We're going to transform the school." Huang, 45, said it's how his Santa Clara company throws a Christmas party. He was there with his wife and two children, who pitched in with everyone else. "We hope this will be inspirational to all the companies of the valley," he said. "If we all gave back, think how great the world would be."

The company has done something like this for seven years, with local schools the target for the past two years. Last year, 500 volunteers pitched in to spruce up an East Palo Alto charter school. This year, the number of volunteers doubled, as a large contingent of Nvidia employees and their families joined teachers, students and parents.

"I like it," said Reto Koradi, 42, an Nvidia software engineer. "Christmas parties are the same every year — a lot of food. This is a chance to contribute." Adobe Systems, Microsoft and Webcor were Nvidia's partners in the event, contributing about \$160,000 in computers, software and materials for the greenhouse. The International Association of Advanced Visualization Centers donated interactive classroom technology for math and science instruction. The East Palo Alto Mural Music & Arts Project worked with students to design the murals.

A sign outside the school announcing a community service day said "We need your help!" But the swarm of volunteers was beyond anything students expected.

"This is like, Whoa! People are coming to help us from all over," said Rosa Hernandez, a 16-year-old junior who plans to attend West Point when she graduates. "I feel good about it."

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"Awesome and amazing," said Eliza Dominguez, a 16-year-old senior, as she watched the swarm of activity with several friends, including student body President Abbey White.

"It's surprising how many people came out," Abbey said.

"I'm speechless," said Ivonne Lopez, a 16-year-old junior. "Amazing," said Paco Alvarez, a 17-year-old senior.

For Principal Vito Chiala, it was a welcome change from the controversy that has swept the East Side district since Superintendent Bob Nunez warned that if there isn't some relief from Sacramento, the district will have to eliminate all athletic programs next year. While the athletic fields and courts will be used for physical education and intramural and lunchtime sports, there will be no teams competing with other schools unless the budget crisis is solved. Saturday, volunteers sanded and painted the basketball backboard and striped indoor courts and athletic fields.

"You go from the gloom and doom to a day like today," Chiala said as he showed off the new audiovisual lab with its gleaming new computers.

"The superintendent is trying to make cuts as far away from the classroom as possible," Chiala said, "but we can't continue to run schools on the budget we had this year." There have been cuts already, including reduced staff in the library, which Chiala says serves hundreds of students every day.

"The improvements are one plus," Chiala said. "Having students, teachers, and people from Nvidia working side by side is the other. They are learning that our students are good people, and the students are learning that having a job is more than going to work." The event was organized by HandsOn Bay

Area, which works with companies to provide volunteers to other nonprofits. The companies donate time and a budget, and HandsOn buys materials and helps companies lay the groundwork a day of service. The tools are left behind with the school, along with any materials and money that is left over.

Nvidia picked Overfelt after looking at 20 Bay Area schools, said Tonei Hansen of the Nvidia Foundation. "We come in and we're everywhere. We want to help them with academic needs and visual improvements." At dusk, swarms of volunteers were still pitching sand and gravel onto the bed of a future volleyball court.

"I've got to go get a shovel," said Chiala, excusing himself.

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