Teachers-in-waiting reclalm Lafayette cemeteries

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Staff Writer

LAFAYETTE — A group of young teachers-to-be did a little moonlighting as cemetery groundskeepers Saturday on their way to their first teaching jobs.

The group weeding, raking and generally taking the Lafayette Protestant and Masonic cemeteries back from nature were some of the newest recruits for the Teach For America program.

The project was one of many Teach For America community service projects undertaken in South Louisiana by teachers fresh from a Houston training course and on their way to teaching at financially strapped schools in the state, said Sarah Newell, executive director of Teach For America-South Louisiana.

"Some of them will be teaching in schools starting Monday," she said.

Teach For America recruits college graduates from all fields and all parts of the country to sign up for a two-year commitment to teach in schools with teaching shortages, Newell said.

Community service projects such as the cemetery cleanup are a way to introduce the new teachers to the communities they will be serving and prepare them for the service work they will be doing in addition to teaching, she said.

Finding ways to introduce the new teachers to the community is important not only because community service is an essential part of the program, but because most of the them are from outside the state they will be working in, Newell said.

"Most of these people don't have a place to live yet," she said. "They don't even have cars."

Jay Carney, a native Virginian and recent graduate of the University of Arkansas, said the Teach For America program caught his eye while he was still in high school.

"It seemed to be the ideal combination of service and teaching," he said. "You're not just teaching in the community but involved in it." Carney will be teaching in Baton Rouge.

Dawn Emick, a native of Michigan and graduate of the University of Michigan, said she chose to come to Louisiana, and will be teaching in New Orleans.

"I'm looking forward to my own classroom," she said. "I'm not here to change the system. I'm just here to teach some kids."

The excitement of Carney, Emick and their colleagues often reinvigorates the teaching staff already in place at the schools they go to, said Shannon Gregory, executive director of Teach For America-South Louisiana.

"They raise the bar everywhere they go in," she said. "It's contagious. When you are around someone who's enthusiastic, you pick that up."

About 60 percent of the teachers who enter the program stick with teaching after their two-year hitch is up. But those who take another career route can still help the teachers who stay, Newell said.

"No matter what they end up doing, whether they start their own businesses, become mayors or start their own schools, this will affect their view of education," she said.