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VCSU students step up to the plate

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“That’s our motto: No squash left behind,” a Valley City State University freshman could be overheard saying.

Six busses brought the VCSU freshman class to a two-acre squash field northwest of Valley City owned by Dan Faust, a pastor at the Sheyenne Care Center. This is the third year that Faust’s squash will be donated to the Great Plains Food Bank who will in turn dish it out to several food pantries across the state.

“About three years ago, I heard a plea over the media saying that with a turn down in the economy, they were expecting a massive increase in the requirements for food,” Faust said.

“So I planted a little extra squash – I knew the squash grew well out here – and I took a couple of pickup loads to the Great Plains Food Bank. Then last year I planted about an acre of squash, and that worked so well I asked the food bank last winter ‘What’s the limit on how much you can handle?’ and (they said) ‘There is no limit.’”

Last year, Faust’s farm produced about 11 tons of squash for the food bank. This year, using twice as much land, Faust wasn’t sure if that amount would double due to a rough growing season that affected many producers in the area.

In 2010, the pastor used a shovel to plant the one-acre field which took several days. This year, facing two acres, he devised a better way to get the seeds in the ground.

“I threw a single planting unit off an old John Deere – it was resting out here in the trees – and I mounted that on a three-point hitch on a garden tractor that I had, and then hooked up a plastic
hose to feed down into the planting unit. As I drove slowly, I had a bucket of seed (and dropped them in) one seed at a time.”

The VCSU students were broken up into 15 teams to tackle the main field while a 16th team handled another area on the farm.

Student Kaylee Cumber said she preferred working the field over being in a classroom.

“It’s nice out and we’re having a fun group activity together,” she said.

The students were at the farm as part of their Living to Learn/Learning to Live service project, which all incoming freshman participate in. The project allows the entire freshman class to participate as a group as a contribution to the city or region.

Mercy Hospital Administrator Keith Heuser and Vicki Grafing, director of Faith in Action at Mercy Hospital, were at the site, along with staff from VCSU, including the university’s president, Steve Shirley. Shirley also put on some gloves and joined the students.

“How in the world are you going to capture all of this?” Heuser said as some photographers tried to fit two acres through a camera lens.

Grafing was the person who coordinated the manpower for the harvest.

“I brought the two together, Pastor Dan and VCSU, and the logistics of what it was going to take for the volunteer force,” Grafing said, adding without the sponsors (over a dozen) it would not have been possible to pull it off.

Faust said he did not expect this many volunteers earlier in the year when he was riding his garden tractor around the field planting one seed at a time.

I had no idea when I was planting that we would be having this efficient organization to help with harvesting,” he said. “If I’d known that I would have planted several times as much.”