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Volunteers sleep in boxes to help homeless

September 28, 2009 | By Melanie Hicken

BURBANK — Burroughs High School students Desiree Martinez and Brittany Lewis spent their Saturday night sleeping in a cardboard box.

Martinez and Lewis were two of around 100 volunteers who set up camp for the night in the parking lot of First Presbyterian Church on Olive Avenue for Cardboard Box City 2009, a fundraiser for Family Promise, a nonprofit organization that works to mobilize communities to help homeless families.

“We both really like doing things for other people,” Martinez said Saturday afternoon while sitting in the fairy-themed treehouse she and Lewis had created out of a cardboard box.


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Family Promise works with various faith organizations across the country to provide food and nighttime shelter to homeless families. During the day, families are welcomed into a day center run by the organization.

“It seems like such a smart way to spread the responsibility of helping the homeless,” said Beth Marcus, a member of the organization’s fundraising committee.

Funds raised by Cardboard Box City will support the official opening of the East San Fernando Valley branch of the organization, which would be the first branch of the national nonprofit to open in Southern California. So far, numerous churches and temples in Burbank, Glendale and Valley Village have volunteered to work with Family Promise.

The event was set to meet its goal of raising at least \$15,000 thanks to pledges of at least \$100 from the people camping out and corporate sponsorships, said Linda Taylor, the event chairwoman.

In addition to raising money, organizers said the event was aimed at increasing awareness about the many families who have nowhere to live.

“People don’t think there are any homeless families in Burbank, but there are,” Marcus said.

On Saturday afternoon, volunteers pitched tents and created shelters out of cardboard boxes of all sizes. Some were simple, while others climbed into elaborate creations, including one meant to look like the White House. Participants ranged from friends and families to service groups and Boy Scout troops.

The campers were to be greeted by Burbank Mayor Gary Bric later in the night and take part in a number of activities including a “soup kitchen” dinner and breakfast, awards for the most creative dwellings, a scavenger hunt and a movie about a girl who went from being homeless to being a student at Harvard University.

Darlene Etter, who had created a jungle-themed box to sleep in with palm fronds on the roof, had heard about the event through her church, Magnolia Park United Methodist. She said it struck her as a very creative idea.

“I love doing community service,” she said. “I just thought it was a very unique way to raise funds for homeless families.”

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