

# Teens add to Gulfport school

*National group focuses on community*

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**GULFPORT** — Vision Services of Pennsylvania put a classroom outside at North Gulfport Middle School, adding an environmental teaching environment to the school campus.

Rose Johnson, of the North Gulfport Community Land Trust, was contacted by Andy Hollenhorst of Vision Services, a youth service organization that began in 1989. Youngsters 14 to 18 apply for a spot in the organization and once accepted, pay their own expenses for trips that can last up to a month.

Hannah Zachary of New York City, one of 26 students who came to the Coast, said she loved the Coast.

"I either plan on coming back to go to college, or to raise a family someday," she said.

"The hospitality here is unbelievable."

Up until Katrina, Vision Services concentrated its efforts in South America and the Caribbean. Most of the children come from affluent backgrounds, but financial assistance is available to those in need. The teens are guided by adult leaders, but they do the work themselves once they reach their destination.

"This is about becoming a part of the community, hearing the stories, living with the people and experiencing things first-hand," Hollenhorst said. "The hope is to instill in teenagers a life long commitment to responsible community service."

It is not all work. Side trips are scheduled each weekend, a respite from the intense physical labor during the week. The teens enjoyed visiting the

French Quarter, Gulf Islands Water Park and a cruise to Ship Island, compliments of Lewis Skrmetta.

The new outdoor classroom allows students to observe nature and will help them learn how to care for and protect the plant life and small creatures that inhabit the Coast. It has been proven that test scores improve when children have such opportunities to learn.

"These kids were incredible. They came here knowing nothing about the area and gave so much of themselves," Johnson said. "They come from fine families who are doing a great job."

The proximity of Turkey Creek to the school makes for a perfect learning lab. The school boasts a marine science class which will put the outdoor classroom to very good use.

In addition to the outdoor classroom, Visions teens also worked in the Turkey Creek area doing construction, home repair and debris cleanup.