

Salem State students construct 50 beds for children living in poverty



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Salem State sophomore Gabby Cerro (left) laughs with Salem State junior Chloe Manousos as they build beds for children who don't have one. Salem State students and alumni gathered to build 50 beds in a four hour period as part of the Build-a-Bed challenge.

By [Cristela Guerra](#)

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SALEM -- The construction materials for each bed included a bag of bolts, a brief orientation, and the name of a child: Tara. Landon. Amie. The first bed, finished with a fresh coat of white paint, was built for a 12 year old named Grace, who lives with her family in Marlborough.

“Grace is sharing a bed with her 10-year-old sister, Faith,” her short bio read, “because her mother cannot afford to buy her a bed of her own.”

The names were motivation for the nearly 100 volunteers at Salem State University’s first Build-A-Bed Challenge. Students and alumni worked in pairs, hunched over pieces of pine in a studio in the school’s O’Keefe Complex. For four hours they drilled, hammered, sanded, and painted dozens of beds, hoping to ensure restful nights for 50 children living in poverty around the state.

“That good night sleep for a student at a young age provides that foundation for big dreams for the future,” said Debra Lee Surface, marketing manager at St. Jean’s Credit Union, one of the event’s sponsors. “If you’re tired and you can’t stay awake in the classroom, you can’t really achieve those goals.”

Each hour, new pairs of volunteers arrived to help out.

“First I have a question,” asked Albenny Arcangel, volunteer coordinator for the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless and a community health worker, to a group. “Have you built before?”

Some nodded. Others looked sheepish and smiled and shook their heads. Arcangel walked them through the basics, handing them a sheet of instructions and materials they would need.

“I’ve seen families myself sleeping on air mattresses, which run out of air by midnight,” Arcangel said. “I’ve seen these families before [they get the bed] and after. It’s really rewarding.”

The event was sponsored by the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless’s initiative A Bed for Every Child, St. Jean’s Credit Union, the Salem State Center for Civic Engagement and the school’s athletics department.

A Bed for Every Child receives 160 referrals per month, according to Robyn Frost, executive director for the coalition.

“One of the most expensive things in our home is our bed,” Frost said. “When you’re raising children in poverty and you’re just able to keep your head above water, a bed isn’t something you can afford.”

At \$250 a bed, delivered with a pillow, sheets, a mattress, and a box spring, the nonprofit needs to raise an estimated \$40,000 per month. Salem State University is crowdfunding to cover the

cost of the 50 wooden twin bed frames. The nonprofit helps a range of ages, from 2 1/2 to 21. Many kids are referred by public schools across the state. They might be in home situations where they're sleeping with a parent or guardian, with siblings, on air mattresses, or on couches.

Field hockey team captains Katherine Crane, 20, of Arlington, and Alyssa Drouin, 20, of Methuen, encouraged their team to participate.

They worked on Grace's bed, cheering when they were the first ones done.

"Once you get to that age where you're in your teens you don't want to share a bed with your sister," Crane said. "I feel it was important to come out and do it."

"I hope she likes it," Drouin said. "Merry Christmas."

Sophomore soccer player Vashti Etienne, 20, said the spirit of the day hit close to home.

"It means a lot to me because I have friends and family who really do have to share beds," Etienne said. "This is really deeply personal."

The event also felt like the right thing to do for two ultimate-frisbee teammates. Jordan Hill, 22, a senior from Concord, got a lesson in how to use a drill from Sam Feinberg, 23, a senior from Lunenburg.

"If you're fortunate," Feinberg said, "you have to give back."

They were providing a bed for a 16-year-old named J.J. who has been sleeping on a couch.

"If the positions were switched," Hill said, "what would I want somebody to do for my own family? It's a great way of reaching out and feeling like you're making a change."

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