



RELATIONSHIPS

The Big Event: Serving Communities Nationwide (and How You Can Too)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- College Students Giving Back To The Community
- Spreading Student Community Service Nationwide
- How To Start A Big Event Community Project



This fall, more than 70,000 students have poured into College Station, Texas, to kick off a new school year at Texas A&M University. And every spring, those students give back to the community through [The Big Event](#)—the largest one-day, college student–run [service project](#) in the nation.

According to Director Reed McReynolds, a junior at Texas A&M, The Big Event is a thank-you to the communities of College Station and neighboring Bryan.

“We take up their roads, we take up their restaurants, we make a lot of traffic and congestion... [so] it’s a really cool way for us to bridge that gap and put a name to a face,” he says. “Yes, we are college students, and we do take up a lot of this city. But we’re here to [give back](#), and we do want to have genuine relationships... so it’s a really good way for the university to partner with the community.”

Since The Big Event was founded in 1982 by Joe Nussbaum, the service project has expanded to 130 events around the nation as students at other universities and high schools have followed Texas A&M’s blueprint. Here’s a closer look at those who have started these nationwide Big Events (and how you can follow in their footsteps):

College students giving back to the community

For more than 40 years, The Big Event has united the student body and allowed them to connect with full-time residents of Bryan and College Station. The volunteer day embodies all six [Aggie core values](#), but it’s selfless service that takes center stage. With tools in hand, students leave campus and do all types of jobs—such as yard work, window washing, cleaning and painting—for both residential and nonprofit property owners in the community who need a helping hand.

Although the tangible benefits of property upkeep are undeniable, McReynolds says that one of the “coolest things” about The Big Event is the connection college students make with residents. “People who go and volunteer at these houses.... They make friends with these people,” he says. “Then people request [those same students] the next year to come back.”

To participate, residents file requests for help and student volunteers through The Big Event website. They are then contacted by a staff assistant, who visits the property to meet the owner, document the scope of the job and determine the types of tools that will be needed. In 2025, 17,118 students served 2,374 residents.

It’s easy to get caught up in the numbers and the magnitude of the event, but selfless service truly shines in the personal interactions this event leads to, leaving a lasting impact on residents and students alike.

For instance, Associate Director Leila Chang, a senior at Texas A&M, says she bonded with a resident two years ago who she still keeps in touch with today. Chang visited the resident the day before The Big Event to make sure everything was ready for volunteers, and they ended up chatting for more than an hour about plants and the homeowner’s cat.

“I ended up... getting to know her and listen[ed] to her story,” Chang says. “She showed me a lot of pictures of her and her family, and I ended up cat-sitting for her that next month.... It’s those little things that really have that impact on the community, and so I’m grateful for that experience.”

Spreading student community service nationwide

Mike Hays, a counselor in Texas’ Northwest Independent School District and a 1996 graduate of Texas A&M, brought The Big Event to Northwest High School in 2013. He says that at that time, there was a push for service leadership in public school systems, and he knew that a volunteer program based on The Big Event would provide that type of experience for students.

“The unity and being like-minded on a project that big is really cool,” he says, “[and] that’s something that also moved me, so I wanted to bring it to the kids.”

According to Hays, NHS’ first Big Event drew more than 1,000 student volunteers, and they completed 30 projects, the bulk of which were for elderly residents who needed help with yard work and cleaning up their properties.

His eldest daughter, Abby Richardson, who volunteered at the Northwest event as a young girl, was inspired as a teenager to start The Big Event at her high school, and later at the college she attended. “When I first heard about The Big Event, even at 11, I was immediately obsessed with it and loved the idea of going out and serving the community,” she says.

Richardson says that her main goal when planning each event was to focus on the people they served. “We wanted the people we were serving to think, ‘Wow, we can’t believe those kids just did that,’” she says. “One year, we moved a boat out of someone’s yard, and the kids pulled weeds and took out brush. It looked like a whole different yard when we were done.” She also recalls celebrating a resident’s 99th birthday while on-site to clean up her yard. “She had on a sash and tiara,” she adds, “and she was just so happy... to have all these students in her home.”

According to Richardson, “anybody can make a Big Event happen. If you’re excited and passionate about the work that’s being done, you can do it. There are resources out there. Find someone in a position of authority [if you’re a student], or if you’re in a position of authority, find a student and figure out how you can make it happen together.”

Richardson hopes to one day found her third Big Event at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, where she serves as assistant director of events.

How to start a Big Event community project

Chang says that the various Big Events held across the country are unique and aren’t regulated or managed by Texas A&M. Instead, they’re inspired by A&M’s effort and are united by the [One Big Thanks Conference](#), which is held annually to motivate and train students to lead events at their respective campuses.

While The Big Event originated as a student-led project, there’s no reason a corporation or business couldn’t lead a similar project in their respective communities, using [A&M’s template](#). If you’re looking to do so, McReynolds suggests starting small and taking the time to get to know those you’ll be helping.

“Focus deeply on the connection before you do the service,” he says. “If you can start with five or six homes and really get to know [the] people in those homes, then that’s how you get traction and really start to build something that’s really meaningful.”

Matt Anderson, faculty and primary adviser for The Big Event, adds that if it’s difficult to find residents or specific properties to serve, you should reach out to local community centers or nonprofit organizations for assistance. “They really appreciate that help, as well as the residents,” he says.

Here are some other tips to get you started:

- Get the support of community leaders.
- Publicize the event to recruit volunteers and secure donations.
- Start accumulating tools early.
- Arrange transportation for people and tools to job sites.

McReynolds says that his goals for A&M’s 2026 event include gathering 1,000–2,000 more volunteers and partnering with 500–1,000 more residents. He and Chang are also working to boost internal relations among their team.

“We want to make sure everyone is known and seen and feels like they have a part and can learn from The Big Event,” McReynolds says.

“It’s been cool to see how one man’s vision to [serve the community](#) has turned into a lasting legacy at the Texas A&M campus,” he continues, “where we get to live out one of our core values of selfless service.”

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