Volunteering at Bounty & Soul proves meaningful for 13-year-old

Fred McCormick, **Black Mountain News**   Published 8:12 a.m. ET July 31, 2019

Dante Saldino sorts fresh produce at Bounty & Soul in Black Mountain, where the 13-year-old spent a week volunteering during his summer break. *(Photo: SPECIAL TO BMN)*

There are all kinds of ways for kids to pass the time during summer vacation, but Dante Saldino wanted to spend part of his break doing something meaningful.

With the final weeks of summer were approaching, the 13-year-old teamed up with Bounty & Soul, where he spent a week volunteering with the Black Mountain-based nonprofit that seeks to create healthier communities through its distribution of healthy food.

"I've had a pretty eventful summer," said the rising eighth-grader at Asheville Middle School, who donated 32 hours of his time the week of July 8. "The week would've been a week for me to just chill out at the house, so I thought it would be a good idea to do something like this."

Last summer, while attending YMCA Camp Watia in Bryson City, Saldino was among several campers to set a goal for 2019.

"I made a commitment at camp that I would do volunteer work for a week before I came back," he said. "Me and my mother started looking at different places."

Saldino and his mother Victoria considered a few options, including soup kitchens in the area.

"I'm a pediatrician, among other things, and from a community health perspective what Bounty & Soul does is absolutely amazing," Victoria said. "I actually did not know about Bounty & Soul until one of my patients told me about them."

Founded in 2014 by Ali Casparian, Bounty & Soul partners with area gardens, food pantries and other organizations to distribute fresh, healthy food to under-served communities. The operation has distributed nearly 1.5 million pounds of produce and whole grains through its weekly markets, which are held throughout the Swannanoa Valley.

Dante worked six to seven hours every day except for July 9, which he took off to celebrate his 13th birthday.

"I worked with two different people from Bounty & Soul," he said. "One of the days I spent the day in a greenhouse sorting and bagging beans, but the other days I worked with (food sourcing and volunteer coordinator Adam Kelly) and we went around and collected food from their partners."

Dante was eager to talk about his experiences when he came home after volunteering, his mother said.

"The first day he was grinning from ear to ear when I picked him up," Victoria said. "He told me all about picking up the food with Adam and how much he learned and what the markets were like. I was very excited to see him have such a positive experience."

While Dante learned about the organization's efforts to combat food waste, support local growers and educate clients on the importance of a healthy diet, the passion of the staff made the biggest impression.

"They're all so energetic and so committed to what they do," he said. "They're definitely not just going through the motions, they're doing everything they can to help people in the community who need it."

Dante felt good about the time he spent helping Bounty & Soul, he added.

"I think I'll do it again," he said. "I'm going to make a similar commitment this year at camp, and I would really like to volunteer with Bounty & Soul again."