Jennifer Reid is a new student this year at The College at Brockport.

But she's also on crutches, and that made it hard for her as she and other students worked Saturday amid the gravestone overgrowth in one of the older sections of the venerable Mr. Hope Cemetery in Rochester.

"I can't do anything for them," Reid said as she looked over the expanse of elaborate stone markers. "But I can do something for the future." She moved briskly along as if the crutches weren't there.

Reid was joined at the cemetery, under Saturday's uncertain skies, by more than 100 Brockport students to do what many classes of many local colleges and universities do in the latter days of August: find in labor and effort a community spirit that will last all their lives.

That's what Mary Ellen Zuckerman, vice president of academic affairs, would like for the students. "I know students who made friends at freshmen events like this who remained close for 40 or 50 years," she said. "It brings them close to each other and to the community."

Nearly all of Brockport's freshmen and transfer students took part in the Saturday of Service, school officials said. They branched out to various locations around the city to help the elderly, entertain the little ones, feed the hungry and, in the Mt. Hope instance, help spruce up one of America's greatest cemeteries.

At Mt. Hope, school buses rolled up in mid-afternoon, each filled with expectant students in gold shirts. The staffers wore green, and they mingled among the gold. Madison Hornung, a Brockport sophomore, was one of those. "I remember what it was like to be a freshman and to come to something like this," she said. "It's a chance to give something back."

Jeffrey Simmons, who leads the cemeteries division of the city's Department of Environmental Services, spoke to the students before they headed out to the rows, there to lop off the small weeds and plants that are beyond the reach of the cemetery mowers. Simmons called the nettlesome plants between the stones "suckers." "Where that name comes from, I don't know," he said with a smile.
Simmons talked a bit about the history of the cemetery, which opened in 1838. More than 350,000 Rochestarians are buried in the cemetery's 196 acres. Mt. Hope still conducts about 150 burials a year, Simmons said.

The stones are marble, bronze and granite and some of the mausoleums are as big as a small house. "I feel honored to have the position I do," Simmons said.

He said the community service day is a tradition for all the local colleges and universities. "It is an obligation for us," Karen Podsiadly, director of community development at Brockport, said. "It's a bonding experience that deepens a sense of community."

Three young students, Rachel Becker, Jessica DeToy and Shannon Allen, all of Brockport, said that they are eager to begin the school year. "I will learn a lot more about this cemetery today," Becker said.

The cemetery's maintenance crew watched as the students grabbed shears and took on the overgrowth. It was work the crew usually does. But Saturday was an exception, at the cemetery and around the city.

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