High School Students Reach Out for Week of Service

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Rachel Madden played with a little girl while helping out at the Sojourner Family Peace Center in Milwaukee with a group of high school students. While she and the girl were putting their dolls to bed, Madden watched as the girl yelled at her doll to go to sleep.

“Her experience (of going to bed as a child) was so different than mine,” said Madden, the director of youth ministry at Holy Apostles Parish. “When I was put to bed, there was cuddling and I was read a book. I can’t change her experiences. I can show her something new, but that (experience) will always be a part of her.”

Fifty-three high school students and their adult leaders engaged in a summer service week July 9-14, visiting service organizations around the city of Milwaukee during the day and staying at Dominican High School overnight. The program, Reach Out Reach In, brings together high school students and recent high school graduates from parishes around the Archdiocese of Milwaukee to serve, pray and learn about Catholic social justice issues.

The Reach Out Reach In program was started 27 years ago by three youth ministers, said Mary Osep, the administrator of Reach Out Reach In. The program is now a part of the archdiocese.

“There are many different mission opportunities where youth go off to Appalachia or even to third-world countries, and those are wonderful experiences,” said Mary Osep. “But 27 years ago, a group of youth ministers got together and said, ‘We have needs right here in Milwaukee. What can we do to help youth see that there’s service work in Milwaukee?’”

Thus, the program was born, with three groups and three work sites. This year, the students served 13 sites: the Born Family Farm, Catholic Charities Adult Day Services, the Early Child Care Education Center, the Easter Seals Recreation Center, House of Peace, The Next Door Foundation, Meta House, Project Ujima, Repairers of the Breach, the Sojourner Family Peace Center, St. Ann's Intergenerational Care Center, Wellspring, Inc. and the Urban Ecology Center. Students helped in a number of ways, such as cleaning and performing maintenance tasks, working on farms, assisting in programs and interacting with the population using these services.

In addition to service, prayer was integrated into each day during the week, Osep said. Each day started with prayer and ended with a prayer service, with a liturgy on the last day of the week. In the middle of the week, students experienced a reconciliation service and received the Sacrament of Reconciliation, if they chose to do so.

“Sometimes what happens is when the youth get exposed to the kind of issues they’re exposed to, all of a sudden they take a look at their lives and say, ‘I’m not living the life I want to,’” Osep said. “There are so many issues in our community I need to be aware of. It opens their eyes with new awareness and a purpose.”

The issues to which the students were exposed dealt with Catholic social justice principles, such as living in solidarity, options for the poor and care of God’s creation. Osep said this week, during which youth took short showers, ate the meal of the day and washed dishes, was a taste of a different lifestyle for many of them.

The week also changed the mindset of many of the high school students.
“Sometimes I get caught in my own bubble,” said Ian Osep, a senior at Wauwatosa West who has participated in the program for the past three years. “Throughout the week, I gain a fresh mind and I’m able to refresh my faith.”

Nicholas Schwichtenberg, who will attend college in the fall, has also participated in Reach Out Reach In for the past three years.

“Every year, it’s life changing for me,” he said. “It teaches me not to take anything in life for granted. I’ve learned not to overreact over little things when I see people that don’t have as much as I have.”

At the end of the week, the students showed their pastors, parish directors, parents and Bishop Jeffrey Haines what they experienced during short presentations.

But the service doesn’t have to end at the end of the week.

“What I see as the real benefit of Reach Out Reach In is that the youth can go back to their worksite at the end of the summer or for the whole next year,” Mary Osep said. “Many of our youth do that, and serve there throughout the year.”

The goal of the program is not only to get youth to reach out but also learn something about themselves while doing something positive, instead of experimenting with negative activities.

“I personally believe there’s no high like service,” Mary Osep said. “It is absolutely the best way to get to know yourself. What is the goal of teenagers? To answer who am I and what am I about. So when you reach out in service, you begin to answer both of those questions as you reach in.”

Mary Osep said some of the youth who dive into the experience change for the better, and she loves being able to see the positive characteristics in each individual come out during the week.

“There is so much goodness and generosity in teenagers,” she said. “This program helps them to call that out, to name that. Those virtues are just needing to be named and needing to be enlivened.”

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