Sometimes greatest need is in own backyard
RORI participants spend week helping neighbors

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WHITEFISH BAY —

Teens throughout the archdiocese are learning that often the greatest need is in their backyard.

As Gerry Wolf, program coordinator for Reach Out Reach In (RORI), explained, “We might be the oldest program of its kind, and perhaps the best kept secret.”

RORI invites high school youth to a week of transformation and conversion as they serve and experience solidarity with those in need through simple living. The teens age 15 – having completed their freshman year in high school – to 18 years spend a week serving as missionaries to facilities within the archdiocese during the day, returning to St. Monica Parish in Whitefish Bay to share with other work groups and address issues of social justice and how they apply to their experience.

During the week, meals are simple, television and cell phones are not allowed as coordinators aim to focus the teens’ attention on service and solidarity with the poor.

This year’s program was held July 26 – 31. On Thursday evening after supper, the teens gathered with Bishop Richard J. Sklba and shared their experiences as missionaries.

They described working at places like Meta House, a shelter for women battling and recovering from substance abuse, where they cleaned an apartment in preparation for a new resident. Students said they were touched by a resident’s story of regaining her sobriety as well as a better relationship with her daughter.

Ann Duffy, a senior at Divine Savior Holy Angels High School, was a Meta House volunteer. She has returned to RORI several times after first being introduced to the program as a freshman, and returned this year as an intern.

“I learned that I can help others who are suffering, and it made my faith bigger just to see the power of God and how it can strengthen people,” she explained. “Service can apply locally, and I came away feeling so grateful for what I have. I didn’t realize just how close these problems are.”

Marisa Román, a 15-year-old junior at DSHA, explained how her group’s experience at Sojourner Truth House in Milwaukee had affected her.

“We realized that we were not only giving our time, but also our care and concern, and in turn we gained a better understanding of what they do, and it broadened our perspective and helped us to reorganize our priorities,” Román said.

Students were asked to relate their experience to an aspect of Catholic social justice, including love for God’s creation, dignity of the human person, and the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable.

During the week, the teens also volunteered at Easter Seals Camp, St. Ann’s Inter-generational Day Care, Transitional Living Services, and Easter Seals in Waukesha. Also included were two family farms, Borne family farm and Wellspring Farm, which gave the students a glimpse into the rigors of keeping a small farm operational, as well as the power of community.

While the work is often mundane – painting, cleaning, pulling weeds – the teens realize that their work goes beyond completing simple, laborious tasks. As one student described the experience at Catholic Charities Adult Day Care Center, “We washed dishes, and pulled weeds, but we also got to socialize with people and gave and received joy in the process.”

More recently, RORI Too was instituted to help lead students into further involvement in social issues by focusing on advocacy. Students interested in this program must first have attended a RORI camp before they can participate.

Camps focus on exploring social and political systems in the community and how they can work for change.

This year’s RORI Too group visited Hunger Task Force,
Second Harvest, the Urban Ecology Center, Milwaukee Catholic Home and Catholic Charities throughout the week.

Bishop Sklba told the group he was “delighted to see advocacy develop,” and challenged the group to question “is there a law that needs to be made or changed to make these places more effective?”

“Service is an element of witness that we hold dearly and need to incorporate into our lives,” Bishop Sklba explained. “Caring for others is a transforming experience, a great grace. It becomes a habit.”

Wolf explained that the experience has inspired students to come back to the program, and often leads the kids to consider careers in social work.

Ann Johnson, who returned as an intern after completing RORI and RORI Too, said “I knew that mission work was something I loved and wanted to continue and I decided to do mission work internationally this year. I came back as an intern in hopes of showing others how fun service can be, and how important it is in our faith.”

Duffy said she is also extending her experiences after high school, and is considering political science and history as majors in college.

RORI began around 1990 as a three-day experience to help reveal the problems of inner cities. Youth ministers wanted students to have the opportunity to participate in service projects and illustrate aspects of Catholic social justice teaching as a living and relevant part of society. The archdiocesan Office of Catechesis and Youth Ministry has seen approximately 750 teens serve in and around the Milwaukee area, with the average attendance each year of 70.

It drew students from 26 parishes and 24 private and public high schools. Wolf noted that the low cost – approximately $200 for the week – makes it an economical choice for families seeking to offer their children hands-on faith experiences.

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