

Catholic Charities Institute puts teenagers to work

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



Sarah Schmitz, 16, a member of Sacred Heart Church in Charleston, helps a resident at Carelink Adult Day Care Center with an art project. Youth with the CCSI helped at a variety of work sites during the week-long program, July 12-17.



Maddie Oxner, 18, a member of St. Joseph Church in Conway (left) and Rita Elizondo, 17, a member of St. Jude the Apostle Church in Jacksonville, play the game "HedBanz" with residents at Carelink.



Sandy DeCoursey, St. Joseph Center of Arkansas board chairwoman, explains to the Catholic Charities Summer Institute Youth where and how to pick blackberries for St. Joseph Farm.



Madeline Bonilla, 14, a member of Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Hot Springs Village picks blackberries in the 100+ degree heat.

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Instead of relaxing under the breeze of a cool fan during one of the hottest weeks of the summer, a group of 70 kids had work to do: feeding the homeless, volunteering at Heifer Ranch, meeting other teens at the juvenile detention center, taking part in a hunger banquet and learning about social justice in the eyes of the Catholic Church.

It's all part of the eighth annual Catholic Charities Summer Institute July 12-17 for ninth through 12th-grade students. The students stayed at St. John Center in Little Rock and were bused to various service activities in central Arkansas throughout the week.

"It's about how lay people can make a difference if people don't have a vocational call to a religious life," said Liz Tingquist, diocesan director of Youth and Campus Ministry. "They learn about all the social justice teaching, everything from human dignity to taking care of God's creation. We have somebody who comes in and talks about taking care of the environment, we go out to St. Joseph's Farm and they learn about organic farming. They work with the elderly, work with the homeless on the streets, go to Our House (homeless shelter) and work with the young kids there who are impoverished. They learn about immigration and how can we address it in a Christian way. The bishop spoke one night because the kids have an interest in 'just war' — when it is appropriate for the U.S. to go in and use force."

With 78 participants this year, including the adult chaperones, Tingquist said the idea for the program came when smaller parishes wanted the diocese to organize a mission trip.

"I had received phone calls from smaller parishes interested in the diocese sponsoring taking kids on a mission trip of some sort because they were too small to organize it themselves ... but there's a lot of people in state we can help, we don't have to go out of state for this," Tingquist said. "We had as little as 20 at the very beginning to last year, 85."

Tingquist said the kindness and willingness of the teens to work is what drives the program forward, pointing to one teen who even gave up his backpack to a homeless man.

Carlee Darnell, 18, a member of St. Mary Church in Hot Springs, has attended for the past four years.

"I think it's one of the most educational events," learning through actions, she said. "It causes a perspective shift. It's one of the most effective forms of apologetics."

This year, the teens had a packed schedule, starting in the early morning and doing a variety of volunteer projects until the evening, which included making care packages for the hungry at Stewpot in Little Rock.

"It is such a hard week, they have no downtime," Tingquist said.

But it's what Rita Elizondo, 17, had been waiting for. It was her first time at the summer institute, but her three older brothers highly recommended it. Her time spent with the homeless opened her eyes, she said.

"Whenever they start talking, you imagine being in their shoes," said Elizondo, a member of St. Jude the Apostle in Jacksonville. "You get a new perspective. It's a good experience, to show God's love is for everyone."

However, there were moments where participants' only job was to listen, absorbing knowledge from speakers including Marcos Martinez on "peacebuilding" from Catholic Relief Services, Reagan Stanford on human trafficking and respect life from Marianne Linane, executive director of Nurses for Life. It's all under the banner of its tagline — "Investigating God's Word in Life."

"It's about how you live out the Christian message," Tingquist said. "It's easy for us to wear a crucifix, but what are you doing to feed the homeless, work with people in prison? It's a spiritual thing for the kids to see they make a difference."

One of the traditions of the program is the hunger banquet, organized by Rebecca Cargile, Catholic Charities development specialist.

The dining room was set up in three parts: first-world countries, second-world and third-world countries in the middle. Teens seated in the first-world country get a well-rounded meal and a little less for the second world. The third-world participants get "a cup of rice with 'dirty water' — water mixed with ice tea. It's an eye-opener, followed by a talk afterward, Tingquist said.

"It's interesting to see the interaction of the kids. You have kids who feel so guilty because that's what they have to eat that night."

For Patrick Giuliani, 18, a member of Immaculate Conception Church in Fort Smith, experiences like this have shaped his desire to study sociology and go to law school, possibly

for immigration and civil rights.

“For me, it kind of showed and helped me understand our role in the future as Catholics,” Giuliani said.

The overall message from the week is simple — you can do your part.

“As an individual American, we can make a difference. You can volunteer at a soup kitchen, be kind to someone at school,” Tingquist said.