

Seventh-grade service trip transforms students, teachers

written by Alesia Schaefer |



ROGERS — Seventh-grade students at St. Vincent de Paul School in Rogers were the hands and feet of their school’s mission statement “faith, service and knowledge” during their second annual service trip to Kentucky in May.

Fifteen students, along with six parents and two teachers from the school, spent four days helping those in need in one of the most impoverished areas of the country. Students completed projects such as hanging sheet rock, planting a garden, digging a trench, installing flooring and insulation, and even cleaning toilets.

The group left before the sun rose May 8, to make the drive to Auxier, Ky., to take part in Hand in Hand ministries program that offers hands-on experiences in making a difference. The ministries immersion experiences propose to teach participants what real world needs and wants are and how to serve with compassion and generosity. Hand in Hand offers ministries in places such as Nicaragua, Belize, Louisville and Appalachia with the vision of building community one person, one family at a time.

Robbie Estes, a parent and original organizer of the first trip for the school, said the opportunity is life changing for both the students and the faculty that attend.

“The students get to see different areas of the country, its harshness and its beauty, by making a trip like this,” said Estes, who traveled with his wife, Peggy, to Kentucky to be a part of this experience five years ago, before they even had children in the school.

It made an impression Estes did not forget.

Fast-forward a few years, and with the help of other parents and teachers, Estes helped plan the first student service trip to Kentucky in 2017.

“When you see how the students act while they are there and how they walk away from the experience,” said Joanna Baese, eighth-grade homeroom and math teacher, “you see how it changes these kids.”

Father Martin Siebold, associate pastor of St. Vincent de Paul, accompanied the group to work, eat, play and pray. Father Siebold offered Mass every morning for the entire group before they packed lunches and water coolers and readied the tools and trucks they would need for the day at the three different work sites.

But, besides the work, Baese said the experience was also an opportunity to learn about the Appalachian culture and the culture of the family there in the mountains.

Nick Webster, who recently graduated from the eighth-grade at the school, participated in the trip last year and said he learned he had so much to be grateful for in his life.

“How people lived was so different,” said Webster. “Their housing and their financial situation made me feel thankful for what I have.”

The trip, now a tradition for seventh-graders in the spring semester, has garnered a reputation and has become a favorite memory for those students who have gone and are now graduates.

“Every student who has gone wants to go back,” Estes said. “You see every student interact with one another and with parents and teachers and you see what makes a community.”

“You think you are going to help others, but you end up taking away more than you give and they end up helping you,” he added.