

# Session helps teens learn to deal with ‘anxious world’

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## Serving, learning, challenging topics

For this year’s Catholic Charities Summer Institute, teens from 20 parishes within the diocese held cookouts at Jericho Way homeless day resource center in Little Rock and River City Ministries and volunteered at several places, including Our House, Arkansas Foodbank and Habitat for Humanity.

Immigration was a main topic during the institute. Teens watched the documentary “Gospel Without Borders,” which featured Bishop Anthony B. Taylor, and discussed his “I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me: A Pastoral Letter on the Human Rights of Immigrants,” from 2008.

Jennifer Verkamp, director of Catholic Charities Immigration Services – Little Rock, spoke about immigration, and Jojo Vazquez, 19, a parishioner at St. John Church in Hot Springs, shared her story of being a DACA recipient.

In an immigration simulation, orchestrated by Elizabeth Reha, director of the diocesan Family Life Office, the teens had to “earn money” on the grounds of St. John Center in order to cross the border. Some paid all their money to a “coyote,” nicknamed for those who smuggle people across the border and were stopped anyway. Families were ripped apart, their children taken and detention centers full, while experiencing the stressful interview process to gain asylum status.

“(They were) going through the plight of the immigrant,” said Tricia Gentry, program coordinator for the diocesan youth and campus ministry.

For teenagers, the constant expectation of instant productivity thanks to technology, academic and athletic pressures to be the best and reports of students just like them being gunned down at an alarming rate, optimism and hope are hard to come by, even for the most faithful person.

However, Catholic professionals provided clarity on ways to cope.

“The Anxious World” panel discussion July 11 was part of the weeklong Catholic Charities Summer Institute, nicknamed C2SI, hosted annually by the Diocese of Little Rock Youth Ministry Office and Catholic Charities of Arkansas.

For 11 years, C2SI has put teens to work in various local service projects as well as educated them on Catholic social justice issues and Church teaching. This year, about 70 ninth- through 12th-grade students and more than 20 adults attended.

Liz Tingquist, diocesan director of youth and campus ministry, said the panel was meant to “take the taboo off of mental illness of any kind.”

“It’s just healthy when young people get together to be able to talk about this stuff because they also see, for instance if they’re going through anxiety and depression, they’re not the only ones who have,” Tingquist said.

## **Positive thinking**

Dr. Sherry Simon, a clinical psychologist, president of Pax Christi Little Rock and parishioner at Christ the King Church, said in the past five to 10 years, she’s seen an increase in bullying and social media escalated it. She said one out of every three sixth through 12th grade students feel they have been bullied.

People should work to build up their own self confidence after being torn down.

“After we’ve experienced something like that, we’re telling ourselves we’re not worth much. We’re kind of taking in that poison they’re giving us, we’re believing it. So we have to work on our own thoughts and feelings,” she said.

When students asked about the most common stresses she sees in young patients, Simon said gender identity concerns and school work.

Logan Limbaugh, 15, of St. Paul Church in Pocahontas, said the presentations hit close to home, as he went through counseling a few years ago due to fear and “it eventually helped,” he said. “... I just like the way they’re helping people.”

Collie, a nurse for 25 years, life coach for the past 10 in Benton and member of the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock, emphasized that it is possible to use nuclear brain scans to understand what the brain is thinking and “emotional trauma can change the brain function.”

As a life coach, she emphasizes positive thinking.

“When Peter was hanging upside down on the cross, what do you think he was saying to himself? ... Do you think he would have said it was worth it?” Collie said. “... So even in our most, what would appear hopeless situation, was that a hopeless situation for Peter? It was actually very triumphant. So how our perception, how we look at something and seeing the beauty around us even in hopeless situations is very powerful and the only person that can do that for you is you.”

Collie said pressures have gotten more intense for everyone.

“We call it ‘the microwave phenomenon’ where there’s a lot of pressure on you guys to perform and to do way more and there’s not a lot of emphasis on prayer and meditation, taking care of yourself first so you may take care of others,” Collie said.

## **Violence, fears**

Msgr. Jack Harris, pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Morrilton, has spent years in prison ministry and crisis response. He told the students, “My life changed drastically March 24, 1998, at 12:34 in the afternoon.” This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Westside Middle School shooting near Jonesboro where two students killed four students and a teacher.

“At that point, that was the worst school shooting in the history of the United States. I got sent to the campus immediately” and stayed with students — attending practices, school events and other activities until they graduated from high school, he said. He is no stranger to personal trauma, as his father was a Little Rock police officer killed in the line of duty.

A year later, Msgr. Harris traveled to Columbine High School in Colorado three times after their school shooting. He went through training with the National Organization for Victim Assistance and led one of the first crisis response teams to New York City after 9/11. He has continued to provide crisis response to law enforcement and firefighters.

After the presentations, the teens wrote in journals, broke into small groups for discussion, then asked the speakers questions.

Emma Parker, 18, a member of Immaculate Conception Church in North Little Rock, asked in light of the school shootings, “what would you say to other kids who are scared it’s going to happen to them?”

Msgr. Harris said students should be able to ask their school administration about safety plans and what is in place. School Resource Officers often help students feel safer and that it’s a healthy response for shooting survivors to rally or advocate for change.

“It’s a fair question for students to ask. And when the media carries the reports the way they do, which is a good thing we need information, that just raises it all the time,” he said. “My congregation wants to know, what’s our plan? What if somebody shows up?”