

OCA students work hand in hand with needy in Appalachia

written by Alesia Schaefer |



As the morning fog rose from the steep mountains surrounding the town, the sun broke through the trees, shining down on the students and chaperones gathered in a circle outside of the renovated building where they stayed.

It was time for the prayer and the day's worksite instructions. As it wrapped up, the group reached for one another's hands and recited in unison, "Not a handout, but a hand up!" while extending their arms out and then raising them in the air.

Volunteers then dispersed to fill the work trucks with power tools, work gloves, lunches and ladders to spend the day at the site of a family or person in need.

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This is how each day begins at Hand-in-Hand Ministries in Auxier, Ky.

For the Ozark Catholic Academy high school students spending their spring break at the site, the day was anything but routine. The 17 sophomores and four chaperones left northwest Arkansas March 22, arriving the next day in the Appalachian mountain town. The goal of the immersion experience is to help those in extreme poverty. The Hand-in-Hand mission is to help build community and transform the lives of both the people serving and the people being served.

During their stay, the students worked at two different sites. One project involved ripping out rotting floors in two bedrooms of a resident's trailer home and re-installing a subfloor. Another project involved building a front porch, beginning with framing the area in front of the entire structure.

Student Hayden Johnson felt it was a great bonding experience for him and his classmates, but he said it was more than that.

"I learned about generosity and the camaraderie we can find completing tasks together," Johnson said.

Clara Mariscotti was one of several students who had previously attended the Auxier immersion trip. Several years back, Mariscotti came as a seventh-grader at St. Vincent de Paul School in Rogers.

"I really enjoyed meeting the client and helping rebuild his floors. I also helped repair his handrail to his steps and got better with a drill," she said.

Most of the students and chaperones had not used power tools or circular saws. But with the help of site managers, students were trained on the equipment and guided with instructions on how to complete their projects.

Completing the work for the residents was important, but the primary goal was to meet and learn about the people and understand their circumstances.

Joe Dues, 75, is a volunteer who works as a site manager. Just a three-hour drive from his home in Louisville, he comes up often to work with different groups because he enjoys doing remodeling/repair work and working with volunteers.

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Like many outreach organizations, Hand-in-Hand has not had fully operational ministries or services for the past two years because of the pandemic.

"The students from OCA were the third group to come to Auxier since the beginning of the year," said Gail Spradlin, director of the Hand-in-Hand Ministry Auxier Center.

Spradlin, who has worked at the center since 2005, works with two other full-time employees who help keep the center running and continue serving families in Floyd, Johnson, Magoffin and Martin counties.

"The average client income for those the ministry assists is \$13,000 annually," Spradlin said. "This may cover basic rent and utilities, but clients can't always afford a car, gas or phone."

But the lion's share of the ministry depends on the generosity of volunteers.

OCA controller Robbie Estes, who first learned about Hand-in-Hand Ministries in 2014, made his first trip to the Appalachian town in 2015 with his family. Since then, he has traveled to the small towns several times during the year.

"I have lost count, but I have been there at least 15 times," said Estes, who recommended Hand-in-Hand Ministries to the school administrators as a destination for student service and leadership at the school.

The trip marked the third time OCA students have traveled to the area. Hand-in-Hand is unique, Estes said, because the ability to work, sleep and eat in the community is unmatched.

"The organization does an extensive job of vetting and selecting job sites and building relationships to give an impactful experience," he added.

"I feel like most people leave here with an appreciation for the lives and the things they have," added Spradlin. "I think they also see that the people here have so little materialistically, but they have genuine happiness and faith. Young people see people like themselves, but also see that they are living in different circumstances."