

## Catholic kids come to city to serve community

By Michelle Martin

ASSISTANT EDITOR

It was a cool week in June when 115 teenagers moved into Gordon Tech High School to spend a week getting to know one another, helping people they had never met and, at the same time, strengthening their faith.

The young people came for the first Catholic Heart Workcamp to be held in Chicago. The camps, which take place all over the United States, began 16 years ago. They bring together Catholic teens — usually traveling with their parish youth groups — in a variety of cities, where they meet up with other teams and are assigned to work on a variety of community projects.

In Chicago, the young people painted rooms in the former Our Lady of the Angels Convent in West Humboldt Park, which is being remodeled into a retreat house; cleaned a soup kitchen; did maintenance for elderly people; kept residents at Misericordia company; moved furniture and washed windows at a Logan Square Catholic school and took on many other projects.

In the evenings, they participated in Mass and a variety of retreat-type activities designed to help them grow in their faith.

Participants do pay a fee for the privilege of getting up at 6:30 a.m. and working all day.  
Happy to help

Caitlin Wilson, 17, traveled to Chicago with nine teens and three chaperones from St. Anthony Parish in Utica, Ky. It was her third time at the camp.

While her work group did not have a physically demanding job — they spent time with developmentally disabled adults at Misericordia — she was glad to contribute something to make other people's lives easier.

“That's the point of Heart Workcamp: to help other people,” she said.

Natalie Thomas, 15, spent time with residents of a home for the elderly as well as doing yard work light maintenance.

“When you see what everybody else has gone through, it kind of makes your problems seem small,” said Thomas.



“It makes you take a step back and open your eyes to reality,” Tucker said.

Clinton Lacy, 17, from Reno, Nev.; Emilee Lewellen, 14, from Fort Smith, Ark.; and Lindsay Brison, 16, from Gretna, Neb., were all first-time participants who were assigned to the same work group, helping elderly people one day, cleaning a soup kitchen another and spending two days at St. John Berchmans School moving furniture and cleaning windows.

“I heard from one of my friends that it was a life-changing experience,” said Brison, explaining why she decided to participate. “Besides the work, there's the spiritual part. It was an amazing experience.”

“All the work makes you realize a lot of things,” Lacy said. “When I'm at home, I say no to wanting to clean things at my own house. Here, I look for things to clean because you're helping someone else. Maybe I could help my own family that way.”

Gordon Tech teacher Leah Bertke, a Notre Dame grad, brought the program to Chicago after participating in it at a school where she taught in Louisiana. There, she first chaperoned students to other sites, then hosted one at her own school.

When she came to Chicago, Heart Workcamps asked if she would be willing to bring the program here.

Participants also looked forward to exploring the city on their last day, June 12. Friday is always a free day for the camp.