



STEWARDSHIP

Workcamp builds faith and character through service

BY BRIAN J. LOWNEY, ACTING EDITOR

7/16/09 12:00 am

WARWICK — Saws buzzed, paint brushes splattered and hammers flew last week as 240 passionate volunteers from Catholic HEART Workcamp made home improvements and completed service projects to benefit low-income elderly or physically challenged individuals all across Rhode Island.

The enthusiastic workers descended on the state from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Jersey, and were joined by youth and their chaperones from Our Lady, Queen of Martyrs, St. Agatha and All Saints parishes in Woonsocket, and St. Theresa of the Child Jesus Church, Nasonville.

Catholic HEART (Helping Everyone Attain Repairs Today) Workcamp began in 1993 in Orlando, Florida with 100 participants. Last year, 10,000 workers volunteered at 40 camps nationwide.

According to Ryan Spooner, co-manager of the Providence camp, this was the first time that participants from across the nation had volunteered in Rhode Island, although youth groups from several diocesan parishes have participated in the program in the past.

The volunteers arrived by van on June 28, and slept in sleeping bags on classroom floors at Bishop Hendricken High School, which also offered the use of office facilities for program staff and the student cafeteria where breakfast and dinner was served daily to the hungry workers.

The enthusiastic young workers and their chaperones attended daily Mass, celebrated by Father David Gaffney, chaplain at the Warwick Catholic high school. Many gathered each night for the recitation of the rosary, concerts of contemporary spiritual music and team- and faith-building activities.

The volunteers pay a fee to participate in the week-long program, which covers the cost of meals and other necessities, and must provide their own transportation to a workcamp. Some groups are sponsored by parishes, while others hold fundraisers to offset the cost of the week-long mission experience.

“Humility and servitude are the two key components of the program,” said Spooner, who serves as Director of Youth Ministry at Our Lady, Queen of Martyrs Church. “It makes you appreciate everything you have.”

Spooner noted that he contacted 47 social service programs throughout the state last fall seeking potential workforce projects. The volunteers eventually worked at 32 sites, and performed a myriad of tasks that included painting homes, clearing brush and cleaning yards, plumbing repairs and installing a wheelchair ramp. The volunteers worked Monday-Thursday, and although Friday was supposed to be a free day to enjoy local sites, many workers used the day to finish projects that they were unable to complete because of heavy rains.

"We rarely turn projects away," Spooner continued, explaining that while the workplace program agrees to supply labor and tools, homeowners or the referring social service agency are responsible for obtaining materials and required permits from municipalities.

"Any project that we start, we agree to finish," Spooner emphasized, adding that the program agrees to pay a professional or uses local volunteers to complete projects that workcamp participants cannot finish in the allotted time.

Spooner explained that most of the projects were completed for elderly residents throughout Rhode Island, most of whom can afford the cost of materials but are physically unable to perform the work.

Catholic HEART Workcamp staff member Brady Haynes, 24, said he found the summer program while searching the Internet for volunteer opportunities.

"I wanted something faith-based," he acknowledged. "This is what I was hoping for."

Rhode Island was the fourth and last stop for the Durango, Colo. resident, who was traveling to Alaska at the end of this mission week to tutor in a summer program for academically-challenged high school students.

"I can see the face of Christ in the campers, and especially in the residents' faces," he continued, adding that his energy level was bolstered by the fervent spirituality of the campers and staff.

"To witness the Spirit moving through the camp is incredible," Haynes said. The devout Catholic recalled entering the program several weeks ago asking himself, "What am I being called to do?"

He said as the month unfolded and he met like-minded committed young Catholics who shared the same values, and as he witnessed the difference his work was making in the lives of so many people, his questions were answered.

"I've grown so much deeper in my faith," he concluded. "This is who I am and who I am living for."

At one Warwick work site, a team lead by Army Reserve Col. Thomas Mikalinis worked diligently to finish building a wheelchair ramp for an elderly woman who has difficulty walking.

"I'm here to spend time with my son Nathaniel, to get away from the office, and to refine my skills," he said. "It's a rejuvenation."

Homeowner John Schofield, whose elderly mother Dorothy struggles to leave the house, said the workcamp program was a blessing.

"She'll be able to leave the house without tackling the stairs," he said. "I think it's a great program. The kids are learning and getting experience. It was nice that this opportunity came along.

Schofield, a maintenance worker, spent part of his summer vacation helping the work crew and added that once the wheelchair ramp was completed, his mother could use her walker to get outdoors to relax in the backyard.

Emily Saporetti, a high school sophomore from Lancaster, Penn., said she volunteered to gain some skills and strengthen her spirituality.

"I learned more about my faith," she said. "I've also been able to think about many things."

Spooner noted that Catholic HEART Workcamp will return to Rhode Island next summer, and is accepting proposals for possible projects. For more information, call 767-2576.