
200 volunteers helping where they're needed

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CHAMPAIGN — Three weeks after Nathan and Alyssa Young tied the knot, the Morton couple opted to sleep in the classrooms at St. Thomas More as part of a week-long work camp.

The newlyweds are among around 200 volunteers spending the week here while taking part in the Catholic HEART Workcamp, a national movement that's had a Champaign stop for eight years. Campers of all ages and from all over the country have spent the past four days painting buildings, pulling weeds and handling dozens of other tasks for area organizations that include Restoration Urban Ministries, Daily Bread Soup Kitchen, Mahomet Area Youth Club, Faith in Action and Willow Tree Missions in Monticello.

Mickey Nickrent of Mahomet, who co-manages the local camp with husband Tony, said Presence Covenant Medical Center "got the ball rolling" by reaching out to Orlando-based Catholic HEART and working to find a school to serve as a home base.

"Presence is so great. They put a budget aside for us to help buy supplies and stuff," she said. "They gave us a lot of referrals of people that needed work, too."

Campers come with church youth groups or high schools, which provide chaperones for the teams they send. The teams are assigned to a work site that, ideally, they'll stay at for the duration. Sometimes, though, groups finish early and move on.

"We have one group that's been at three job sites in three days," Nickrent said.

The day begins with a 6:15 a.m. wake-up call, followed by breakfast and a program featuring music, a short talk or a skit. Participants attend Mass before heading out to work from around 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. After a little downtime, then dinner, the night wraps up with an evening program that varies each day and can include games, speeches or entertainment.

Thursday night is an annual highlight: Residents and representatives of agencies that received services from the campers come in and talk about the work that was done for them and how grateful they are.

"They're crying or they're just so joyful, and I've heard before, 'You hear in the news about the youth, and you think there's no hope for this country. And then these youth came to my house this week and I just see a totally different side,'" Nickrent said. "It's so neat to hear that, but also to know that what we're doing here is making an impact in this community."

Morton's Mike McCarthy chaperoned a group that helped renovate a 44-unit facility for Restoration Urban Ministries by tearing out old flooring, painting walls and filling in holes.

Never mind that most of the volunteers didn't have a background in any of that.

"What they might lack in expertise, they more than make up in enthusiasm and energy and their willingness to learn," McCarthy said. "It's not about making a contractor-quality finished product. It's about the opportunity for these kids to get together, share the spirit of Christ and to just put their guard down and understand that part of being a good Christian is stepping up and helping others out."

Nickrent said Restoration Urban Ministries actually planned for its work project to coincide with the camp because of previous help it had received from the program.

Not even persistent rains during the week could slow down this year's group, which included four priests camping in at St. Thomas More.

"Somebody sent me a picture today, and they'd actually made a makeshift tent outside with tarp, and they were working under it," Nickrent said. "It was a flexible group all around; it was just amazing to me."

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