

TEENS PUT HEART INTO WORK AT CATHOLIC SUMMER CAMP



By *Fr. Peter Daly, Syndicated writer for the Catholic Press*

Every now and then a program comes along that is exactly right for the times. recently I participated in such a program, the Catholic HEART Workcamp.

For a week, 300 teens from 11 states gathered in Nashville, TN for hard work, joyful prayer and happy silliness. I traveled with 23 teens from our parish and nine adult chaperones. It was one of the best weeks I've ever had, period.

Catholic HEART Workcamp gather teens from across the country. They sleep on the floor of classrooms, pray and play in the gym and pack lunches for each other in the cafeteria. During the day they fan out across the sponsoring city to do hard work for those in need.

The teens come at their own expense, paying \$250.00 plus transportation through fund-raisers or out of their own pockets.

Our teens built a rock wall behind eight new houses for Habitat for Humanity. They cleaned out the yard of a home for the mentally disabled, moved the possessions of a woman burned out of her apartment, sorted food at a food bank, washed dishes, organized clothing, picked up litter, and painted houses.

They prayed together after breakfast and on the way to the job site and after lunch, usually sitting under a tree at the job sites. They had evening programs, beginning and ending with prayer.

The evening programs were high energy, with the kind of loud, pulsating music young people love. but the words and the message were straight from the Gospel. There were skits, hymn singing, mime, contests, witness talks and Masses. One evening we had nine priests in to hear confessions. It took several hours. When I read the schedule I thought, "Oh they are going to hate this". I was wrong. They loved it!

I heard comments like, "This camp changed my life". One boy from our group said, "I was losing my faith before I came, but I think I got it back at this camp.

The leaders of the Catholic HEART Workcamp have figured out the teen-age mind. Everything was done in their idiom of T-shirts, baggy clothes, boy meets girl contests and dance, dance, dance.

One continuing appearance throughout the week was the night between good and evil symbolized by a counselor dressed like a professional wrestler, big belt and all. the last night one counselor, a young woman, came out in a giant sumo wrestler's padded suit and took on the evil one. She literally crushed him. the kids were in hysterics. but the message got across.

The workcamps were started seven years ago in Orlando, FL, by a couple, Lisa and Steve Walker. In the first year only 100 young people participated. This summer more than 4,000 participated with Catholic HEART Workcamp in 14 cities.

We saw the first fruits of the week almost immediately. On the bus coming back from Nashville, traffic on the interstate came to a stop behind an accident. One of our young men came to the front of the bus and suggested we say a rosary. Later, when we were delayed by rain, the teens started singing hymns they learned that week.

When the bus arrived back at the church parking lot, our driver refused a tip. He said he was impressed with the faith of the youth. he did not want money but he did want a bible. Score one for our teens and the Catholic HEART Workcamp.