

CATHOLIC KIDS PAY TO WORK THEIR HEARTS OUT

SERVICE IS THE CALL, MEETING PEOPLE A BONUS AT NATIONAL WORK CAMP

STEVE LYTTLE, STAFF WRITER - The Charlotte Observer - 07/02/2004

What kind of teenager would be willing to pay \$256 for the "privilege" of painting buildings for four days in the hot summer sun, then sleeping each night on a hard gymnasium floor?

The answer to that question could be seen across the Charlotte area during the past week, as about 450 Catholic teens from across the country did community service projects at dozens of sites as part of the national Heart Work Camp.

"This is my fifth year with the program, and it never gets old - helping other people," said Vern Thomas, an adult chaperone from Silver Spring, Md.

Charlotte is among 24 Heart Work Camp sites across the country, and officials of the Florida-based organization say the Queen City hosted the largest contingent of any U.S. locale this summer.

Students arrived in Charlotte Sunday and spent their nights at Charlotte Catholic High School, where they participated in skits, prayer services and other entertainment each evening.

By day, they scattered across the area to help: at Crisis Assistance Ministry, Room at the Inn, Holy Angels Nursery in Belmont.

One group spent the past week in the Lincoln Heights community of northwest Charlotte.

Thursday, about a dozen teens painted the exterior of Friendship Primitive Baptist Church, much to the delight of the church's pastor, the Rev. Levi Wilson.

"These people have been jewels," Wilson said. "They've been able to do things that we couldn't get done."

Heart Work Camp directors contacted Charlotte city officials, who put them in touch with local neighborhood groups and charitable organizations.

Beverly Lawson, president of the Lincoln Heights Neighborhood Association, said, "We had no problem finding enough projects to do in our area."

"It's been a lot of fun," said Danielle Fontaine, 15, of Annapolis, Md. "The pastor at the church has made it clear how much he appreciates what we're doing."

"And the people in the neighborhood have been great," added Jessie Massey, 15, of Lexington, Ky. "They've brought food for us to eat and have thanked us."

Camp participants pay the fee, then select the city where they want to work. In most cases, groups of a dozen or more youths from the same parish travel together. Once they arrive at a camp site, the groups are split and sent to different projects.

"That way, they get to meet kids from other places in the country," said Jill Trail, an adult leader from Virginia Beach, Va.



Students and chaperones paint the outside of Friendship Primitive Baptist Church in Charlotte's Lincoln Heights community. Catholic students from around the country worked in Charlotte this week on community service projects as part of Heart Work Camp.

"Our group has really bonded," said Adam West, 17, of Fairfax, Va. "It's become like a family. We've gotten to know each other and rely on each other."

The work ended Thursday evening. Today is the campers' fun day - trips to Carowinds, Discovery Place and Concord Mills.

"This is our third year here in Charlotte, and we'll probably be back next year," Trail said. "We feel as if we're doing God's work. We're trying to make a difference."