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News & Features

Catholic families help grow the seeds of faith

archived from: 2015-09-04

by: Bob DeWitt

Faith in Action program reaches out to struggling neighbors

The Laubacher, Stepko, Johnson and Jeffries families are among hundreds of local Catholics sowing the seeds of faith by serving the poor.

They are helping make the Church of Pittsburgh come alive at a time when many young people are drifting away.

In less than one year, the Faith in Action program at SS. John and Paul Parish in Franklin Park/Marshall Township has enabled nearly 500 youths and their parents to prepare and serve meals to homeless veterans, visit the lonely in nursing homes and fix up crumbling houses. It's an outreach model that can be replicated in smaller parishes.

"I was really excited to be asked to help because there are so many people less fortunate than me," said William Jeffries, 16. "We bought food, made a four-course dinner and served it to the veterans. It was an amazing experience that brought out Christ in me."

Service can help strengthen the religious commitment of young Catholics. The National Study of Youth and Religion found that fully one-half of young people who said they were Catholic as teenagers no longer practiced the faith 10 years later in their 20s.

Formed last October with the support of Father Joseph McCaffrey, pastor of SS. John and Paul, the volunteer ministry strives to put faith in action by loving and serving our neighbors in need. Bill and Joan Johnson and their daughters, Maggie and Caroline, feel blessed to volunteer.

"We say prayers before and after the event, and it helps me look at people as children of God, not just that they're needy or poor," said Maggie, 14. "One of my favorite places to volunteer with my dad is Jubilee Kitchen. Everyone is so appreciative, and I really feel we've done something for them and for God."

Caroline, 12, has served at Produce to People, the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank's large-scale produce distribution program.

"It made me feel really good," Caroline said. "It was like I was a disciple of Jesus."

Vegetables grown in the new parish garden go directly to agencies serving the hungry. This



summer alone, 130 pounds of tomatoes, green beans, squash, cucumbers and peppers have been donated. "I love watching people experience the joy of helping others, and seeing that not everyone has everything they need," said Brenda Byrne, youth outreach coordinator and driving force behind the program. "Our faith isn't just about going to Mass on weekends; it's not just the talk, but the walk."



The Rev. Mike Wurschmidt, founder of Shepherd's Heart Fellowship in Pittsburgh's Uptown neighborhood, has been helping homeless vets for two decades as a federal chaplain with the Veterans Administration Pittsburgh Healthcare System. He says about one-third of those living on city streets are U.S. veterans, and he appreciates the parishioners' generosity.

"It's wonderful to see young people get involved in outreach, being the hands and feet of Christ outside the four walls of a church," Rev. Wurschmidt said. "Those who come to serve end up receiving much more, and they better understand the Lord's command to love thy neighbor as thyself."



Byrne receives powerful testimonials from parishioners who now look at life differently.

"One mom told me that her daughter was crabby and didn't want to come, but by the end of the night she had started to shine with excitement," Byrne said. "She now plans to return with her friends." Byrne hopes other parishes will try similar efforts, and she offered her assistance.

"Start with one organization that needs help," she said. "Describe the service event in your parish bulletin, recruit volunteers and you're under way."

Marybeth Jeffries is honored that her family is able to help their less fortunate neighbors.

"It's humbling and gratifying and has compelled me to look deeper into my own faith journey," she said. "What an awesome opportunity my husband John and I have to show our children that this is our Catholic faith."

From Shepherd's Heart, Jubilee Kitchen and Light of Life Rescue Mission, to the Little Sisters of the Poor and Concordia nursing homes, to Catholic Charities and Catholic Heart WorkCamp, Faith in Action has brought forth the Spirit in parishioners at SS. John and Paul, especially in William Jeffries.

"I learned from my parents and in religious education that it's important to help others in need," he said. "If you're thinking of getting involved, follow your heart. Let God decide for you."

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