

Teens fortify houses, faith lives

Many youths, volunteers return year after year to WorkCamp



Teens pray during Mass July 25 before heading out to their work sites.



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Arlington Bishop Paul S. Loverde (second from left) helps workers from Crews 26 and 27 (from left) Joe Ammirati, a parishioner of St. Raymond of Peñafort Church in Springfield; Paul Ngo, a parishioner of Holy Martyrs of Vietnam Church in Arlington; David Milne, a parishioner of St. Raymond; and Connor Gavin, a parishioner of St. John the Apostle Church in Leesburg, mix cement. The bishop (below) uses his smartphone to take photos of teens hard at work on-site.

By GRETCHEN R. CROWE
Catholic Herald Senior Staff Writer

It's almost impossible to go to WorkCamp and not come away inspired.

Teenagers are in good spirits, helping one another and deepening their relationships with God; adults are instructing and guiding, but also laughing and shouting "Praise the Lord" at the top of their lungs.

And nothing inspires more than the repeat attendees — the faith-filled teens and volunteers who return to WorkCamp summer after summer to help improve the homes of local Virginia residents.

Four-time attendee Lindsey Neimo, a volunteer who attended WorkCamp for three years as a high schooler, said the week spent making Virginia residents' homes warmer, safer and drier imparts "a feeling you don't get anywhere else."

"I love looking around and seeing the community that's built from teenagers and people my age and younger," said Neimo July 25 while tossing bags of candy to vans of teens as they pulled out of Freedom High School in Woodbridge on their way to sites in Stafford, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania. "It's incredible."

Out of the 680 teens attending the two weeks of diocesan WorkCamp — one at the end of June, the other at the end of July — 291 (or 43 percent) of them were repeat attendees, according to Kevin Bohli, director of the Youth Ministry Office, which organizes the event.

"I think that most teens return because living the message of the Gospel for a week through prayer, service and community brings about a deep joy in their lives," Bohli said. "They spend one week completely unplugged from the rest of their world, make many sacrifices from their normal comforts, and focus almost completely on another person's needs rather than their own."

Chris Stelly, 16, a parishioner of St. Raymond of Peñafort Church in Springfield and a member of Crew 8, returned to WorkCamp because he "got a lot closer to God" last year.

"Throughout my life, I was not questioning my faith, but some parts of it were kind of hard for me to believe," he said. "Last year adoration helped me get closer, and this year I looked forward to that the most. I went to confession and I actually got kind of emotional, which I didn't expect to do."

It's also the fourth summer volunteering for Jude Doiron, 17, from St. John the Apostle Church in Leesburg, though only his second at the diocesan WorkCamp.

"I've gotten a different appreciation of what it means to serve," he said. "I see how other people live and I'm not so enclosed in my own life. My eyes are open."

The returning volunteers aren't limited to teenagers. Deacon Vincent Nguyen, from St. Philip Church in Falls Church, attended WorkCamp for the third time this July.



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Arlington Bishop Paul S. Loverde

"These kids really inspire me," he said. "The work, the prayer, the teamwork. They work together, and they really show their hearts to the people here."

Toni Papp, director of youth ministry at Holy Family Church in Dale City who marked 10 years volunteering at WorkCamp this summer, said she enjoys seeing the teens flourish during the week.

"I really just like working with the kids, seeing their experience of it, hearing how they work together," she said. "The theme of their answers is, 'We just really like helping somebody else.' I just like being part of that. It's inspiring. It's something that always gives me a little bump up in my faith life."

Plus she gets to learn skills like deck-building, roofing, drywall and painting.

"Every year I come, I learn something new," she said. Arlington Bishop Paul S. Loverde, who is a longtime WorkCamp attendee himself, led the teens in adoration, celebrated Mass and visited several sites July 25, stopping to take photos of the teens with his smartphone and even to help mix cement.

"As I watch them, I'm so very proud of them, because what they're really doing is they're taking their faith and they're putting it in action," Bishop Loverde said. "Really that's what Christian charity is all about. It's faith in action."

The bishop said he hopes the teens leave the week with the understanding of how much they are loved by God and how they can share that love with others through their service.

"Look what they're doing," he said. "In the end, the people who live here, look how their lives are improved. It's just a wonderful example (of) how we join love of God with love of others."

Since 2010, the Youth Ministry Office has been hosting two WorkCamp weeks each summer in order to accommodate growing numbers of teens. This year's Marian theme, "Behold Your Mother," permeated this



Ben Jones, 17, a parishioner of St. Luke Church in McLean and a member of Crew 21, completes the installation of a new bathroom window.



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Mariana Conte, 18, a parishioner of St. Philip Church in Falls Church and a member of Crew 26, saws through a beam of wood.

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Andrea Sack (left), an adult volunteer with St. Joseph Church in Herndon, prays the Our Father with teens during Mass.

summer's events, with each day devoted to one of the joyful mysteries of the rosary.

Evening events included talks and music by musician Cooper Ray; a talk by Jeff Grabosky, who ran across the United States praying the rosary last year; an improv group; and adoration and confessions. Mass was offered every morning before the teens left for their work sites, and both Mass and the evening programs are integral to providing a full spiritual experience for the teens.

"We certainly want (the teens) to understand that God has called them (to WorkCamp) not so much for the work they're doing, but to change themselves," said Bohli. "That's the main reason that He calls them here. I always remind them that if God wanted to end all poverty in this area He could do it in an instant. But He chooses to use them so that they're learning in the process as well and

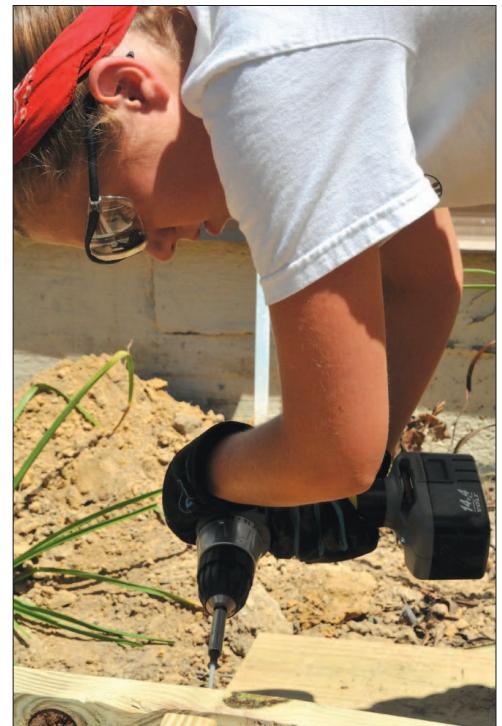
growing in their relationship with Christ through this experience."

That seems to be the case for first-time attendees Jordan Golomb and J.T. Speetjens, 15-year-old parishioners of St. Joseph Church in Herndon, who both said WorkCamp exceeded their expectations.

"This has been amazing," Golomb said, drill in-hand and bandana on-head. "I love my crew, our resident is super sweet. I've grown a lot through this."

In addition to attending adoration and confession — what she called a "powerful, emotional moment" — Golomb said she's learned how to use tools, formed friendships and developed empathy for others.

"I've learned a lot about what other people go through," she said. "Coming here and seeing this house and the shape that the wheelchair ramp was (in) before we made it, you



Jordan Golomb, 15, a parishioner of St. Joseph Church in Herndon, drills pieces of a board together to build a wheelchair ramp in Fredericksburg.

couldn't walk on it because you would have fallen through a hole."

"I feel so blessed to be able to come here and help (our resident)," said Speetjens, who served on the same crew as Golomb. "It's been such a spiritual epiphany. It's been so opening to my mind (about) how great the Lord is and how much fun you can have helping people. It's been overall a fantastic experience."

Encouraged to attend by his sister, Speetjens expected to have a good time at WorkCamp, but he didn't realize what a difference it would make to him spiritually.

"I went for the fun-factor," he said, "but I've come to just love it for the overall devotional necessities that it's fulfilled."

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