

Basilica's new guides prepare for onslaught of spring visitors

The 2007 recruits training to be tour guides at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Baltimore, were a welcome sight for Margie Hoffmaster.

The Holy Trinity, Glen Burnie, parishioner is one of 41 original volunteer tour guides who have taken about 57,000 visitors through the United State's first cathedral since it reopened in November, and the new recruits will be prepared to help out when the expected onslaught of guests visit the restored Baltimore landmark in the spring.

More than 50 people responded to the Basilica of the Assumption Historic Trust's January appeal for more volunteers, and they began to assemble at the cathedral in February for historic instruction and guidance on how to lead a group of spectators through the cradle of American Catholicism.

"I'm glad to see you folks," Ms. Hoffmaster told the group of 16 tour guide cadets Feb. 28 as they were learning in-depth historical facts about the basilica, which builders broke ground on in 1807. "We could use the relief."

In the years before the \$32-million project that restored the basilica to the vision of its famous architect, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the basilica was a quiet building with few visitors, said Mark Potter, executive director of the trust.

However, the basilica is now a monumental attraction that demands four guides at each of its free public tours, scheduled Monday through Saturday at 9 a.m., 11 a.m. and 1 p.m., noon on Sunday, and a plethora of private tours throughout the week, Mr. Potter said.

Armed with a packet of historic facts about the construction of the basilica, its significance in American Catholicism, its restoration, the architecture and the cherished relicts, statues and artistry inside the co-cathedral, the new recruits hung on every word Mr. Potter uttered as he gave them an extended showing of the

building.

“You are not here to teach a three-credit course on the history of the basilica,” he told the relieved new volunteers. “You are here to wet their whistle.”

The new cadets have the advantage of being teamed up with the current tour guides, and the cadets can watch as they guide people from all over the country hungry for information about the building.

“I’m eager to learn as much as I can about the basilica before being let loose with a group of my own,” said St. Joseph, Fullerton, parishioner Mike Scally, a retired payroll specialist. “But, I’m also looking forward to getting started. I’m very comfortable talking in front of large groups, and I fell in love with this place the first time I walked in here after the restoration was finished.”

Groups have been as small as three and as large as 200, Ms. Hoffmaster said.

When the very large groups come in – most times unexpectedly – the four volunteers split them up into separate gatherings and begin at different parts of the basilica for the 45-minute tour, she said.

“We’re happy to have you all aboard,” Mr. Potter told the tour guide cadets. “This really is an exciting time to be associated with this incredible place.”