

Beyond the Bell: Our Lady of Mount Carmel a national model for service

By Erik Zygmunt

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ESSEX – “I want these kids to know how good they have it,” said Tae Edmondson, a sophomore at Our Lady of Mount Carmel School in Essex.

Edmondson and two peers – Rachel Hairsine, also a sophomore, and Stephania Long, a freshman – were teaching first-grade students about social justice, specifically the fact that basic needs such as food, shelter and clean water are not met in many parts of the world.

The young children also learned a basic way to help.

“Can anyone tell me about Operation Rice Bowl?” Hairsine asked the youngsters.

“You help the poor by putting money in the Rice Bowl so that everybody can have what they need and not what they want,” commented one girl, conflating the related lessons on Third World lack and excessive Western consumerism.

Older students teaching younger students was one of many activities planned for Mount Carmel’s annual service week in partnership with Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services, this year exploring the theme “So All God’s Children Have Enough.”

While the younger elementary students participated in Operation Rice Bowl, the high school students learned about “addressing injustice on the systemic level,” said Kathleen Sipes, president of the parish school.

“They learn about lobbying and advocacy,” Sipes said, acknowledging that controversial issues such as minimum wage arise in the process.

Sipes said she wants Mount Carmel students to work for social justice, whether or not the path to resolve the issue is clear.

“One option is to not opt out, to grapple with your conscience,” she said.

The Mount Carmel high school students are getting there.

“Sometimes when I’m lying in my bed, I think about how comfortable it is,” Edmondson said. “I wish I could give everybody a bed and a shower.”

“So many people don’t have what I have,” Long added. “Learning that made me want to talk to them more, to share my knowledge with them. I can’t really do everything, but I want to do as much as I can.”

CRS hopes that 40 percent of America’s Catholic high schools will be encouraging such thinking by 2019.

That goal is part of CRS’s Global High School program, which will encourage schools to explore global citizenship and Catholic identity through a three-tiered affiliate

program.

Already involved as one of 25 “platinum” schools in the country, Mount Carmel is at the forefront of the effort. The program will officially launch at the National Catholic Educational Association Convention and Expo in Orlando from April 7-9.

Schools at the platinum, gold and silver levels will participate in Operation Rice Bowl as well as other CRS programs, such as Fair Trade and Food Fast. The highest-level schools such as Mount Carmel will serve as mentors and models for other schools entering the program.

“The goal is that, as these children get older, they’ll start to incorporate the Catholic social teachings into action,” said Sipes.

Mount Carmel’s service week culminated in the 30-hour CRS Food Fast, no small undertaking for growing teenagers.

“They give us water, orange juice and Gatorade,” Long said. “Those are the only things we have.”

Sipes said that the experience would definitely help the students “relate to the hungry.”

“I think it’s an eye-opener for them,” she said.

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