

Migrants lose camp, chapel

SAN DIEGO - Migrant camps have existed in the Carmel Valley area of north San Diego County longer than most of the area's housing, certainly longer than the million-dollar homes that now carpet the valley east of Del Mar.

Home to the men and women who work in the vegetable and flower fields, the makeshift camps are out of sight and, typically, out of mind for the majority of residents in the area. But some residents, worrying about the potential for crime, are wary of having the camps so close to their homes.

Late last year, the city of San Diego and landowner D.R. Horton began tearing down some of the makeshift shelters north of the city in McGonigle Canyon on the edge of Rancho Penasquitos, demolishing some 20 structures that the laborers had constructed on a city-owned hillside. Another 50 structures were removed in the following weeks.

But despite a dwindling number of workers and growing community opposition to their presence, a Catholic parish that has reached out to migrants in the area for more than 20 years is continuing to do so.

The neighbors may not like the migrants living in the area, said Teri Trujillo, who runs the migrant outreach for Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Penasquitos. But that does not negate the fact that the growers need the workers, and that the workers have needs, spiritual as well as physical.

Every weekend, Our Lady of Mount Carmel volunteers hold Mass for the workers, and classes for English and religious education. This past year, five or six of the regulars received their first Communion at the parish, and others were confirmed.

"We have a group of very dedicated people," said Trujillo of those who provide outreach to the farmworkers.

Since the recent destruction of the camp, Our Lady of Mount Carmel has passed out blankets, tarps and jackets to the men, and a few women, who have been sleeping in and around nearby tomato fields.

On rainy weekends, the church opened its doors to the migrants, and will continue to do so whenever the weather is inclement.

Father Frank Fawcett, pastor at the parish, continues to say Mass on Sundays, even though the chapel which had been built by the migrants near the camp now no longer exists. Instead, the Mass is held along Black Mountain Road near the Rancho del Sol Nursery.

After Mass, volunteers serve a warm lunch for the migrants that includes beans, rice, a chicken dish, juice, water and dessert.

“We try to make it a family meal,” since most of the men have left their families behind in their nation of origin, Trujillo told The Southern Cross, newspaper of the San Diego Diocese.

The men asked for Mass to continue. Some 40-60 men attend the service each week, more than attended when the Mass was held in the makeshift chapel.

So far, there has been no stir raised about the weekly Mass, said Trujillo, though the city asked the church to remove the tables and benches at the site.

She said the men miss their old chapel, which they had built in 1995 down by the creek in the valley. “It was lovely, and it was theirs,” said Trujillo. The benches were built as an Eagle Scout project by a parishioner at Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

Today, according to the San Diego Police, there are fewer immigrant workers living in Rancho Penasquitos than there were 10 years ago, because many of the growing fields have been supplanted by housing.

The number of workers has dwindled to 300 or fewer, mostly adult males who find daily employment in the few remaining fields in the area.

Asked why, in light of opposition to having the migrants in the area, the parish continues its outreach, Trujillo responded, “Because we’re Catholic Christians and that’s what we’re supposed to do. We’ve come to know them, love them and care about them.”