

On a Mission: Young parishioners, students opt for summer service

For many youths and young adults in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, summer travel meant mission work. Whether it was to the other side of the world or remaining in Maryland, giving back has definitely been trending.

Millersville to Jamaica

A group of 21 teenagers and adults from Our Lady of the Fields in Millersville spent July 6-13 at Jacob's Ladder, a Mustard Seed Community near Moneague, Jamaica. It provides shelter, health care and community to 95 adult residents with developmental disabilities, many of whom have been abandoned.

The Millersville crew, under the leadership of Father Matt Himes, associate pastor, and parishioner Lynn Watts, spent time getting to know the residents while participating in projects such as harvesting crops and tiling and painting in some of the homes. It wasn't all work - they enjoyed playing bingo and dancing with the residents, as well as group prayer and reflection.

"All the residents seemed so willing and happy to share something of themselves with us, and it was wonderful to see the mission team, teens and adults alike, dig deep and likewise share a bit of themselves," said Father Himes, who led the trip just weeks after his priestly ordination.

He added, "The best part of the experience was living in community with people with special needs, praying with them, laughing with them, journeying with them for a week. It was powerful to experience the presence of God so vividly in these special friends - from Jason, who loved to 'do' the ladies' hair, to Lorenzo with his contagious smile and willingness to help out, to Peetagay, with her commanding personality and demonstrably simple, yet deep, trust in our Lord."

Father Himes said all from Our Lady of the Fields agreed it was a struggle to detach from technology during the trip, but they "grew as a group to discover the beauty of being present."

Maryvale Prep to Kenya

Eleven students and three teachers from Maryvale Preparatory School in Lutherville had the unique opportunity to travel to Kenya June 7-22. They visited a girls' school, volunteered at an orphanage and learned about and toured coops led by Kenyan women.

According to Ann Cory, a theology teacher who was on the mission, the goal was for students to learn through immersion the importance of education and the struggles of women and children living in underdeveloped countries; provide the occasion to develop a personal relationship with God; and realize their extraordinary position as an agent of change.

The students were each paired with a "sister" from the girls' school, and they became fast friends as they shadowed them while attending classes, eating meals together, dancing and just hanging out.

"They are fully aware that not many people in their country, especially girls, get the opportunity to be educated so they value this gift more than anything," Grace LaLomia, a rising senior, said of her Kenyan counterparts. "It makes me appreciate the everyday opportunities that we have but easily overlook because they are normal to us.

"Our farewell from the girls' school was one of the hardest moments I've ever faced because of the incredible relationships we built there. Every single person at the school welcomed our Maryvale group with arms wide open."

For Margaret Enoch, a rising junior, one of more memorable moments was visiting the orphanage.

"Seeing those children and the joy they possessed in the conditions in which they are living made me look at myself differently," she said. "They had pride for the tattered clothes and few, if any possessions, they had. I will never forget how thankful they were for everything they had.

"The people there, they taught me pure happiness, true love and lasting friendships. *They served me.*"

Central to Western Maryland

Closer to home, an early session of Baltimore Work Camp was held June 23-28, with representation from several Central Maryland parishes, including the pastorate of St. Anthony Shrine, Emmitsburg/Our Lady Mount Carmel, Thurmont; St. Joseph, Emmitsburg; St. Michael, Poplar Springs; St. Timothy, Walkersville; and the pastorate of Holy Family, Middletown/St. Francis of Assisi-St. Mary, Petersville.

About 70 teenagers and 30 adults stayed at Bishop Walsh School in Cumberland, their base as they worked on projects in people's homes for the week. They built wheelchair ramps, re-shingled a roof, repaired drywall, painted decks and assisted with lawn care.

The theme for the mission trip was "Communio: Now & Forever."

"We focused on how Christ can be found in both Communion and community," said Marissa Paoletti, director of Youth Ministry at St. Timothy. "It was clear that the teens experienced that truth first hand during their week at work camp."

Several priests, including Fathers Collin Poston and Stephen Roth, and the Capuchin Franciscan Friars serving Our Lady of the Mountains Parish in Cumberland; Deacon Joseph Wolf; and Sisters Beatitude and New Eve, of the Servants of the Lord, served alongside the group throughout the week, which included Mass and a vocations night.

On the last day of work camp, the residents they had served shared a brief program and a meal.

"Listening to the teens and residents share about the relationships they built over the course of the week and how they shared Christ with each other is what work camp is all about," Paoletti said.