

# Vacation Bible School leaders take creativity to new heights

**By Elizabeth Lowe**

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Walking into Vacation Bible School at the Church of the Nativity in Timonium was akin to entering a theme park.

A nearly 6-foot-tall rainbow archway made of pool noodles and balloons fronted a hallway that had been transformed into an airport runway, with flashing colored lights along the floor, a more-than-5-foot-tall silver air traffic control tower, sky blue paper covering the walls and plastic foam clouds.

Umbrellas, cellophane raindrops and miniature hot air balloons were some of the decorations hanging in classrooms.

Nativity and other parishes throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore are organizing Vacation Bible Schools this summer that creatively engage their audience of pre-school and elementary school-aged children.

Many parishes use materials from Group, a Christian publisher, for their Bible camps. This year's theme is Sky; the catchphrase is "Everything is possible with God."

Lisa Scata, director of children's ministry at Nativity, who co-directed its Bible camp June 25-29, called it "Disney-like" and "an experience for kids where every little detail counts."

"Let's give them something they love so they want to come back for more," Scata said, while "introducing a message to them about Jesus in a fun way."

The "hands-on, discovery method," Scata said, was fun for the 250 participants who

saw the Bible camp's theme repeated through the decorations, activities, Bible stories and songs.

"It's almost magnetic," Scata said.

Other parishes are equally inventive with their Bible camps.

As a heat wave arrived June 29, plans for a helicopter landing at St. Ignatius, Hickory, were scrapped, but a hot air balloon was inflated in Frederick County, at St. Peter the Apostle in Libertytown.

Dorris van Gaal, director of faith formation for the Catholic Community of South Baltimore and director of its Vacation Bible School, said children expect interactive learning and Bible camp is no different.

"The kids are so used to it and know how to work with it," van Gaal said.

For the past eight years, Zachary Bowman, a senior at The Johns Hopkins University in Homewood, has created scenery for Vacation Bible School at the Catholic Community of South Baltimore, which includes Our Lady of Good Counsel, Holy Cross and St. Mary, Star of the Sea.

Bowman, 21, spent about 40 hours and used plastic foam to make the scenery for the parish's Bible camp, which 13 children attended June 24-28.

He made four clouds, each about a foot tall; six 2-foot-tall "Bible buddies," which he cut and painted; and an approximately 4-foot-wide sign with the Sky theme and catchphrase.

Bowman called 21st century children visual learners and said, "to really get them to focus and for them to want to be there we need to make it a fun atmosphere."

Bowman, who attended Vacation Bible School at Our Lady of Good Counsel years ago, said "we really didn't have a big setup portion."

"We would all be in a room together and we would just go through the points of the Bible and have a little snack and play a couple of games," Bowman said. "We didn't have the nice-looking background."

After its Bible camp ended, the Catholic Community of South Baltimore, as it has for the past three years, gave the scenery and decorations to Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Ellicott City. The materials will then go to Calvary Lutheran Church and finally to St. Michael, Popular Springs, both in Mount Airy.

Judy Gruel, director of religious education at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, where she runs the parish's Vacation Bible School, said "it's amazing he (Bowman) does it for his church."

"His service to his own parish is nice," Gruel said, "but when you look at it and envision how it spreads throughout the wider church and the archdiocese, his service is incredible."

Gruel, who expects 130 children to attend OLPH's Bible camp July 9-13, said sharing materials is environmentally friendly and saves parishes money.

Despite the increased time and effort parish leaders and volunteers spend preparing for Vacation Bible School, directors said that the cost for Bible camps hasn't increased by more than \$5 at Nativity, the Catholic Community of South Baltimore or Our Lady of Perpetual Help in recent years. Fees range from \$30 and \$45.

It is a sound investment.

"Vacation Bible School is so much more (than) an experience with Scripture and really helps to build their relationship with Jesus in so many ways," Gruel said, "because they learn how the other disciples and early Christians built their relationship with Jesus."

"Having that foundation," Gruel said, helps children to be "ready to hear more" at religious education classes during the school year.

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