

In Lebanon, young adults renovate homes to help poor, build friendships

BEIRUT (CNS) – For the poor in Lebanon whose lives are clouded in misery, even a fresh coat of paint can brighten bleak living conditions.

That's what Caritas Lebanon youth volunteers are doing for 40 needy families all over the country this summer for their annual home renovation project, now in its 16th year.

“Due to the crisis Lebanon is going through, the need is bigger and bigger, and we are trying our best to stand beside the people, to help them as much as we can,” Roy Bachaalany, youth field coordinator for Caritas Lebanon, told Catholic News Service.

For three years, Lebanon has been sinking under an economic meltdown that has seen its currency devalued by more than 90%. Poverty is now a reality for nearly 80% of the population in what was previously considered a middle-income country.

Inside a two-room dwelling in the upscale Achrafieh section of Beirut, dust filled the air like flurries of snow as Caritas Youth volunteers sanded the concrete walls to make a smooth surface for painting.

Adel lives there with his wife, Nardine, their 4-month-old son, Nader, and Adel's mother, a widow who suffers from chronic back pain due to a disk injury.

As part of Adel's job as attendant for the adjoining parking lot, the family lives rent-free in the tiny home, hidden in the shadows of two luxury apartment buildings.

A tall chinaberry tree provides a splash of green to the

courtyard in front of the house where Nardine sat with Nader and with her mother-in-law, Mirvat. The two women looked on in amazement at the Caritas Youth volunteers busily working inside as Nader happily kicked his feet, oblivious to the activity.

Nardine said she prefers to spend as much time as possible outdoors in the courtyard with Nader to escape the toxic, musty smell that permeates the house all year long. During winter's heavy rains, water seeps in from the ceiling, sprouting mold that spreads across the walls like ivy.

The Caritas Youth team came equipped to solve the leaky ceiling issue, spreading two coats of a waterproof sealant on the flat roof with brooms.

"We love them because they are working so hard for us," Mirvat told CNS about the young people working in the sweltering heat.

Over three days, working from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., the young adults build a friendship with the family. They shared meals, supplied by Caritas, and, in getting to know each other, the young people grew to understand the struggles of the family.

What's most important, Bachaalany said, is to try to lift the spirits of the families.

"Due to the crisis, all the negative things, people are getting depressed," he explained.

"Life is very hard now," Adel said, shaking his head with concern. Up until Lebanon's economic crash in 2019, his monthly salary was \$500. Now it is equivalent to only \$30.

"Although it's bad, I always say, thank God for everything," Nardine said of their living situation.

The family also has been helped by Caritas Lebanon as part of the organization's food box and infant formula distribution.

Currently there are 1,480 Caritas Youth volunteers in Caritas Lebanon.

“We try to serve God by serving humanity. St. Teresa of Kolkata is our model. We follow her steps to help the poor,” Bachaalany said.

Many Lebanese who used to regularly donate to Caritas Lebanon are now among the needy supported by the organization, which this year marks its 50th anniversary.

Caritas Youth volunteer Mariella Saliba, a second-year pharmacy student at Lebanese University, explained: “At Caritas, we are trying to help as many people as we can. There are so many poor people in Lebanon now. The situation is getting worse.”

This summer’s home renovation team includes 12 Spaniards and one Italian. The foreign volunteers typically see Caritas Lebanon’s young adult activities on social media and get in touch with the organization to volunteer.

“I am very happy to help,” Marti Oliveras, 18, of Barcelona told CNS. “I hope Lebanon is going to have a better future, with the help of everyone, especially the international community.”

“I was shocked at the contrast between the rich buildings surrounding them and their poverty,” Oliveras said of Adel and his family. “But even though they are living in poor conditions, they are always happy.”

“As a Christian, trying to put myself at the service of others, I was questioning myself, ‘Why do I do this, and why am I here (in Lebanon)?’” Italian volunteer Lorenzo Domenichetti, a 23-year old nuclear physics student, told CNS. “And the answer is the people. They are so grateful. The smiles on their faces is something I will never forget.”

After three days, Nardine looked at the newly painted, gleaming rooms and exclaimed, "It's so beautiful!"

"Now I will be happy to spend more time inside. I'm looking forward to a fresh-smelling house. Our lives will be better than before," she said.

Mirvat now has a clean "canvas" from which to glorify God. She explained that whenever she is particularly inspired by a Bible verse, "I write it on the wall so we will always remember the verse and all Jesus does for us. Jesus is everything! He is King of Kings!"

The family and young people bid each other farewell.

"Bye-Bye. I will miss you. God bless you," Mirvat told Domenichetti, who in turn assured her, "I will always have you in my heart."