

‘Being Christ to others,’ growing in one’s faith at heart of work camps

GEORGETOWN, Ind. (CNS) – Paige Fitch planted her shovel in the dirt and swiped her arm across her forehead. The temperature in Georgetown on this June day was 83 degrees, but the high humidity made it feel closer to 90 – and it was only 10 a.m.

The soon-to-be college freshman from Grace Lake, Illinois, couldn’t pause long to talk. There were raised garden beds to be completed, and only five more hours to finish the project. She wanted to see the job through to completion – after all, she paid good money to be able to work so hard.

“The first time I did it was to get service hours for high school,” she explained. “It was just so much fun and I met so many neat people, it just called me back.”

The “it” she refers to is Catholic HEART Workcamp, offered by a Florida-based nonprofit of the same name. The work camp in Georgetown, near New Albany, and one in Indianapolis were two of the 46 sites the organization offered this summer in 28 states and three international locations.

“It’s a boot camp in Catholic living,” said Carley Haselhorst, young adult minister at St. Pius X Parish in Indianapolis and co-coordinator of the city’s Catholic HEART camp, based at the parish.

Participants are primarily Catholic students in grades 8-12, as well as young adults, youth ministers and adults. They travel from around the country to take part in the camps for what Haselhorst calls a five-day experience “of living their faith to the fullest in action, prayer and the sacramental life of the church.”

Catholic HEART Workcamp, or CHWC, was created by Steve Walker, a former parish youth minister who participated in nondenominational work camps. He found they “lacked a Catholic spirituality and perspective,” according to the organization’s website.

His experience inspired him to create a Catholic alternative with a three-fold mission: to serve those in need; to inspire participants to continue living as disciples of Christ through service; and to help youths grow in their Catholic faith through the sacraments, prayer and presentations.

Jami Ogle of St. Mary of the Knobs Parish in Floyd County first participated in a Catholic HEART camp 16 years ago. Now the 38-year-old married mother of three is director of the Louisville camp, which is actually based in Georgetown and in part serves the New Albany area.

“The camps are different than typical mission trips,” she told *The Criterion*, newspaper of the Indianapolis Archdiocese. “While at the work sites, (the participants) do work, of course. But they’re also encouraged to interact with the people they’re helping, have prayer during lunch and reflection time to talk about the experiences of the day.”

Camp directors develop partnerships with local Catholic and non-Catholic service organizations to create work sites and projects for CHWC participants to practice Christ’s call to serve others in need.

The type of service varies. Among the different Indianapolis work sites, some campers in Indianapolis assisted clients and helped stock food at the local St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry, while others interacted with residents at the Little Sisters of the Poor’s St. Augustine Home for the Aged.

In the Louisville/New Albany-area work camp, said Ogle, participants “might plant flowers, weed gardens, spread mulch, fix toilets, wash windows, pour concrete, help tear down or

fix up a house.”

“They learn a lot of practical skills – although sometimes I think they end up wearing more paint than the walls,” she added with a small chuckle.

Performing such service out of state is an important component of the program, said Craig Gelhausen, youth minister at St. Pius X and work camp co-coordinator with Haselhorst.

“When you’re doing service work in your own parish, it’s hard to get that sense of the universal church,” he said. “The more we can get kids together and experience that, it just opens up their eyes like crazy.”

Whatever and wherever the work, the kids enjoy it, said Ogle, a statement backed up by Fitch as she leans on her dirt-crusted shovel.

“I love seeing the people we help smile – that puts a smile on my face,” she said, wearing a broad grin as proof.

What also sets the camps apart from other similar, nondenominational experiences is the strong focus on growing in the Catholic faith.

At the camp home base – typically a school with participants sleeping in classrooms – campers might worship at daily Mass, spend time in adoration, pray the rosary and receive the sacrament of reconciliation, depending on which of the five types of camps offered they are attending.

The primary opportunity for growing in their Catholic faith comes in the evening. Each camp holds a program every evening with lively praise and worship music, spiritual talks and witnesses, and time for discussion and reflection.

The evening program is led by college students “who are just trying to live their faith out,” said Gelhausen. “Seeing that example gives the kids a little more courage to live out the

faith in high school.”

Such was the case for chaperon Alex Moehn, 23, of Kimberly, Wisconsin. Taking time from painting a mural for St. Elizabeth Catholic Charities, she admitted that CHWC was “something I needed as a teenager.

“I went through a lot of negative things in high school,” she recalled. “My youth minister convinced me to go (to a work camp) every year. I just don’t know what I would’ve done without it.”

This was Moehn’s 10th consecutive work camp. She also is active with her home parish and helps with its youth ministry program.

“It gets pretty loud and rowdy at the evening program with praise and worship,” she said, explaining her raspy voice. “But behind all that there’s a lot of prayer time. Strengthening your relationship with Jesus just happens (at camp) whether you try or not.”

Ogle notes that the evening activities focus on “serving with a purpose and bringing Christ into your life as an everyday thing, not just when you need him – and being Christ to others and not being ashamed to show that.

“We try to encourage them to keep doing service projects back at home,” she adds, emphasizing that “when they leave camp, they are fired up.”