

Considering the alternative

Students spend spring break doing service projects in Murphy

by KATIE MOORE

staff writer

MURPHY— A small group of college students and campus ministers from around the Diocese of Charlotte recently made a big impact on four rural mountain counties of western North Carolina.

As part of an alternative spring break, the students spent March 7-14 performing service projects with a Catholic agency and local nonprofit organizations.

The project was a collaborative effort between diocesan campus ministry and the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) — a program of Catholic Social Services' Office of Justice and Peace — and St. William Church, both in Murphy.

“Part of our reason for partnering with OEO was so the students would have an opportunity to learn more about the state of North Carolina,” said Gloria Schweizer, Asheville-area campus minister.

“This was the first time that I think anything like this has been done out in this part of the diocese,” said Claudie Burchfield, OEO director.

St. William Church hosted the students and campus ministers.

“The students really had a great experience with the parish,” said Schweizer of the interaction between the parishioners and the students.

By the end of the week, they “had a new level of appreciation for each other,” she said.

“The retired people from the parish have been a big part of keeping the community together,” said Kelly Laccinole, a freshman at Central Piedmont Community College and UNC-Charlotte.

Throughout the week, parishioners provided the students with a pancake breakfast and cookout and the students joined them for a game night and Lenten service at the church.

“The trip involved lots of physical labor as a team, as well as focusing on understanding the deeper social issues involved in the four far-western counties of North Carolina,” said Schweizer.

“The men’s group at the parish worked with us,” said Julie McElmurry, campus minister at Wake Forest University and Salem College in Winston-Salem.

“I told them, ‘We have strong backs and good attitudes, but no skills and no tools,’” she joked.

At the OEO, the students and parish volunteers worked on the exterior of the building — pressure washing, scraping and repainting.

They cleaned out a home used by St. William Church for faith formation activities and they volunteered at two local thrift stores that specialize in providing goods to low-income families at affordable prices.

“One of the students commented that it was cool that we didn’t go to some exotic location,” said Erin Leonard, campus minister at Appalachian State University in Boone.

“It made a big difference to know that we were helping people within our own diocese,” she said.

Staying within the state also allowed them to save money on gas and accommodations.

“We could do the trip economically and make more of an impact,” said Leonard.

Throughout the week, the students went to daily Mass at St. William Church and met in the evenings for prayer and devotion.

“The thing that I appreciate about a trip like this is the Catholic spiritual dimension,” said Schweizer.

Another goal of the project was to provide an opportunity for Catholic students from the different universities to interact.

In total, there were eight participants representing five universities.

“I would say making the connection with the parish and with OEO” was one of the most rewarding aspects of the trip, said McElmurry.

“It made me realize that what we were doing was making an impact,” she said. “And there is more to it than us accomplishing these tasks for them.”

“I think they just really enjoyed having us there,” she added.

Burchfield agreed that the connection with the parish was an important component.

“I think that was so important for them to be able to connect with that group and have an opportunity to share experiences,” she said. “It was beneficial to both the youths and the parishioners.”

Contact Staff Writer Katie Moore by calling (704) 370-3354, or e-mail kmmoore@charlottediocese.org.