

They've gone urban

Nine Catholics find a worthy summer mission in Ypsilanti

By Mark Haney
The Catholic Times

YPSILANTI — Michelle Leppek wanted to go to summer camp.

Instead, she's spending her summer in the worst parts of this city. And she could not be happier.

Leppek is one of nine people who signed up for the first Catholic Urban Challenge, an eight-week program being offered through St. John the Baptist Church. It offers participants a chance to serve their fellow man in an urban setting.

The nine young people — Aaron Murphy of Philadelphia, Courtney Sebek of Dunbar, Pa., Donna Bonicatto of Eau Claire, Wis., Marnee Wohlfert of Ypsilanti, Nick Pobocik of Lennon, Sara Downes of Westphalia, Tony Zick of Ann Arbor, William Murphy of Williamsburg, Va., and Leppek, from Midland's St. Brigid of Kildare Parish — are living at the parish while spending their days running a free day camp for elementary-age children, repairing the homes of economically stressed families, interning at local non-profit organizations (including a free medical clinic, homeless crisis center and local food bank) and doing door-to-door prayer ministry outreach.

Leppek, 20, had applied to be a counselor for a Catholic summer camp. She also was looking into a Christian project in rural Appalachia.

"I was contacted to promote this program at MSU," said Leppek, a junior majoring in landscape architecture and urban planning at Michigan State University. "I put up flyers and things.

"I didn't get the counselor position and had applied to this as my backup. I am really glad this is where God put me. I wanted to do some form of service. I didn't want to do anything with my major, I wanted to do something within a Catholic community."

That could have meant rural Appalachia, but she's glad it didn't.

"You don't have to leave where you are from to find problems," said the daughter of Dan and Nancy Leppek. "You can start with your own neighborhood. This is closer to home, this is where I am from, these are the people I want to serve."

Service is what attracted Wohlfert, 23, to the program. She'd done some service work at her parish, Most Holy Trinity in Fowler, and in a year she spent at Emmanuel House in Ypsilanti — she now lives in Ypsilanti while majoring in theology at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. She also spent nine months in mission work in Argentina. The urban aspect was just what she was looking for.

"I was attracted to it mostly because it is a service program," said the daughter of Jerry and Catherine Wohlfert. "I was looking for something service-oriented. I feel the Lord is moving me in this direction. Looking at the experiences I have had, one of the areas I had not done anything in was urban-type ministry. So for the summer I was looking for some service, possibly urban ministry that would be challenging and certainly very Catholic."

In turn, Wohlfert got Downes to come. The daughter of Paul and Karen Downes had just graduated from Central Michigan University with a degree in graphic design.

"My friend Marnee and I decided that we wanted to spend this summer doing some sort of service," said

Downes, a member of St. Joseph Parish in Pewamo. "I knew I felt more called to serve than to immediately start a career. We checked out a few other programs, but nothing really called to us. Rachel Thelen contacted Marnee about the project and Marnee told me about it. I really liked that it had multiple kinds of service, a strong community aspect and formation in the faith."

Pobocik, 24, came for the challenge. He'd learned about the program through his pastor, Fr. Steve Mattson, at St. Mary Queen of Angels Parish in Swartz Creek.

"I signed up because I wanted to be challenged in my faith," said the son of John and Margaret Pobocik. "As Catholics it is so important for us to truly know our faith and live it to the fullest. ... I feel this eight-week experience is a way of getting a taste of what the Lord truly is asking of all of us. To give to those who have little, to give our time, to converse with strangers and, most importantly, to listen. We can easily forget that the Lord is not only in our own hearts but in the strangers who open their door to us, the children we work with at our youth camp and the families we help when we

complete home repairs. More than ever this summer has shattered stereotypes and generalizations I have made in the past. We are all children of God. Granted most Christians know this, it has quite

another meaning when we truly live by the words we speak."

The idea for the Catholic Urban Project began in 2006, when Fr. Bob Roggenbuck, now pastor at St. John the Baptist Church in Ypsilanti, noticed the Church's lack of presence in certain urban areas. The program also is a response to Pope John Paul II's encouragement during the 1991 commissioning families for the Neo-Catechumenal Way to present "with fresh enthusiasm and new methods, the eternal and unchanging content of the heritage of the Christian faith."

Why Ypsilanti? Although Ypsilanti's population and size are somewhat smaller than the typical "urban" area, the city struggles with many of the problems associated with larger urban areas, such as a poverty rate of over 24 percent (nearly twice that of the national average), homelessness and other urban issues, including a high unemployment rate.

"There is a need here as well," said Fr. Roggenbuck, "and since we are here and have the desire to address that need, this is the first location for the Catholic Urban Project. Suffering doesn't have geographic boundaries."

The nine urban missionaries have repaired handicapped ramps, replaced a toilet, fixed rotting stairs and made other home repairs and cleaned for local residents in need. They ran "Slice of Summer," a free day camp that included music, service projects and original skits by the children (one complete with bumbling knights and a break-dancing court jester). Nearly 40 children participated. The second session of the camp, which began Tuesday, July 13, was expected to serve more than 50 kids.

"The grace of God is so apparent," said Downes. "The days are full with the kid's camp, working with



Participants in the Catholic Urban Project work on a handicap ramp at a home in Ypsilanti.

other non-profits, construction fix-ups, prayer outreach and community life. Yet I don't feel discouraged, even when I am exhausted. There is so much joy even in the most mundane of tasks. Which is one of the things that has stood out the most to me this summer. I don't have the strength to do all this on my own, so it must be God."

What has made the biggest impression on the young urban missionaries, however, is the door-to-door prayer outreach.

"When I heard we'd be doing that I was really intimidated," said Leppek. "I didn't think I would be good at all. I think it is the one place I have grown the most because I really started to look at it as being bigger than me; it isn't all on my shoulders. I just let Jesus work through me. It helped to take myself out of it and realize I am working for Christ. As long as I trust Him it will work out and it has."

Downes agreed. "There are many times I can remember going out for prayer outreach where I was tired, it was 90 degrees and I just didn't have it in me to make conversation with strangers," she said. "Yet somehow we would find ourselves saying the right things and having conversations with these strangers about life and the love of God. With God just your presence and willingness are enough for Him to work."

Murphy found the door-to-door outreach particularly rewarding.

"We have prayed with young men finishing school," he said, "with the relatives of hospital patients and even with a man who had just been released from prison and eagerly sought the Lord's guidance in his new life."

"So many people have opened their hearts to us and all we really ask is if they have any prayer intentions," added Leppek. "The way we do it is so

simple and so loving that I think people are willing to listen and be open to the idea. Most people have been kind."

All of this has made a lasting impression on the Midland Dow High School graduate.

"People are good. We have seen that time and again, no matter how well off they are in their life. They respect us and wish us a good day. That has been really uplifting," she said. "And most prayer requests are for the neighborhood. When we talk to people it is amazing how they are all worried about each other."

For Pobocik, a 2004 graduate of Fr. Luke M. Powers High School in Flint who earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education in 2009 from Ferris State University in Big Rapids, a different memory remains.

"The most memorable aspect of the summer for me has been the beauty of nine strangers becoming nine siblings in a big family," he said. "We've become a tight knit group of young adults, with all the ups and downs of a typical large family. We all stepped into roles that so beautifully fit our own unique personalities. That is why I will never turn down an offer to live in community and serve Christ. This summer has been full of moments of laughter, prayer, fellowship and love. I love the community I am a part of this summer because I love the people I am working with. The Lord truly was at work when he brought this Catholic Urban Project community together."

Most of the participants said they would do it again, as the project plans to spend the summer of 2011 in Flint. Wohlfert, however, said her goal will be to find some new service experience. And yet, she will remain involved.

"After this I think I want to stay on the path of more service opportunities," she said. "I'd like to get experience working in hospitals and ministry. And, since I am still going to be in the area, stay involved in what we have started here." †

Courtesy photo



Marnee Wohlfert



Sarah Downes



Seeking shelter from the heat, the Catholic Urban Project participants rest and eat lunch in the shade of a tree. Courtesy photo

BRIEFLY

Parish hosts festival
FOWLER — Most Holy Trinity Parish will host its annual festival on Saturday and Sunday, July 24-25, on the parish grounds on Kent Street. On Saturday, there will be a volleyball tournament, tractor pulls and a social tent featuring music by the Knock Offs, Vegas game room, food and drinks. Sunday's events will feature a roast beef dinner, a parade, a 3-on-3 basketball tournament, children's games, a bean bag toss tournament, bingo and live entertainment. The festival concludes with a cash raffle of prizes totaling \$6,000. For more information, call Don or Lori Gilbert at (989) 593-2741 or Joan or Chris McCreary at 587-4150.

Play ball!
LANSING — The annual Diocese of Lansing Family Night for Vocations at the Lansing Lignuts baseball game, sponsored by the Knights of Columbus, is 7:05 p.m. Friday, Aug. 20, at Cooley Law School Stadium, 505 E. Michigan Ave. To get tickets, or for more information, visit www.knights7311.org or call (517) 485-4500.

Rummage for sale
MICHIGAN CENTER — Our Lady of Fatima Church, 913 Napoleon Road, will host a rummage sale from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday, Aug. 6, and from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Aug. 7, in the parish hall. Donations can be dropped off from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 4. The proceeds will fund the parish life apostolate. †

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