

Church in Charlotte sent teens here to help with projects for community

By CHRIS STESKY
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About 50 teens from a North Carolina church youth group have been getting their hands dirty and giving their muscles a workout here in eastern Ontario between June 7 and 20.

The first group, about 35 strong and often working in sweltering heat, rebuilt a foundation for the addition at the Caintown church, built a wheelchair ramp in Chesterville, re-sided a Morewood seniors centre wall and strengthened its floor, served meals at Brockville's Loaves and Fishes restaurant, and even watched in awe as a calf was born while they were helping out at a dairy farm.

Toward the end of their week, they worked at the Habitat for Humanity site on Brock Street to seal the house's foundation walls and work on construction.

The second group of about 15 worked primarily at the house site, putting up the building's walls. All the teens are enthusiastic about Habitat for Humanity, which is an important project in their church, as it is in many American communities. (In fact, the group brought a \$15,000 US donation to the local Habitat from their congregation.)

And they were all having the time of their young lives.

These teens are members of the Myers Park Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. They belong to a large and active youth group that sends a contingent of teens out into the world each summer to give help where it's needed.

One year, at the invitation of a local church, the teens go to a third world country, the next year they stay in a location experiencing

urban decay, and the next it's a rural setting. Several adults accompany them, and funding for these trips comes from contributions from the 3,800-member Myers Park congregation and from pie sales and other fund-raisers the youths arrange.

This year they've come to Brockville, at the invitation of First Presbyterian Church, to help small congregations of rural eastern Ontario churches get work done they can't do themselves.

Rev. David Jones, who coordinated the visit and arranged for the work placements, said churches here at first wondered what a bunch of teens could do for them. But there are enough outlying churches with small and aging congregations that Jones's list soon began to grow.

From the teens' point of view, they had seen photos of farms and churches in eastern Ontario that they would be helping, but nothing prepared them for the city they were to stay in. (They stayed in the church itself.)

"Brockville is a gorgeous town," said Andrew Lopez, who is doing his third summer youth mission.

"This city has been great," said Jan Scott (that's her first name, Southern style, but without a hyphen) Swetenburg. "(When we're working,) people bring us water."

"And ice cream!" added Lydia Pharr, who, like Lopez, is a student leader for the group.

"I couldn't believe it — this is the place where Thousand Islands dressing was invented," said Lopez, asking if it was served in all restaurants in the area.

But their interests are not trivial. These teens are learning from their experiences, growing together as a group and developing an under-



CHRIS STESKY/THE RECORDER AND TIMES

Clearly bursting with youthful enthusiasm, members of Charlotte, North Carolina's Myers Park Presbyterian Church youth group gather on the steps of First Presbyterian Church. Accompanied by 10 adults, the 35 teens who came to Brockville in the mission's first week, were eager to work hard on projects in several rural churches and in Brockville this month. A smaller group of 14 teens took their place the second week.

standing that not all people are as privileged as they and their families in Charlotte.

Why do they leave the comforts of their homes to work in strange places?

Pharr loves the people they meet and the feeling she gets, knowing she's having a special experience not every teen gets.

"It's a unique thing," added Swetenburg. "It's a reality check for us, and a chance to do some substantial stuff."

Lopez, who has been on missions to Mexico and Portland, Oregon, in past years, has gained a new appreciation for the quality of life in his community while also discovering that the human spirit can shine under even the most adverse circumstances.

"We lived in a shanty town in Mexico, where people lived in hous-

es made of tin and cardboard and anything else they could find, with no running water. Still they were optimistic.

"And in Portland, where housing is so expensive, I had conversations with the homeless there. They told me about their former lives, before they lost their homes, and I was struck by their intelligence and grace," Lopez added.

He saw, through this experience, that adversity can come to anyone.

Swetenburg described a moment that had touched her while she was serving at the busy Loaves and Fishes restaurant in Brockville, for families and people who ordinarily can't afford to go out to dinner.

"I was bringing a salad and overheard the family praying and thanking God. It was so inspiring."

Both Myers Park youth groups

agreed to lead their respective Sunday services at First Presbyterian Church, said Jones. Their theme was breaking down barriers: crossing international borders and also removing barriers between adults and teenagers. They realized that small congregations can be important, too, said Jones, as they worked at the rural churches.

Lopez said throughout the year their youth group tries to continue giving its members life-changing experiences, though on a smaller scale than their summer missions.

The value of having these young people here, said Jones, is to show Brockville's church youth group and the fledgling downtown youth group, Youth Unlimited, just how much an active youth group can accomplish.