

Program helps girls

air issues, emotions

By Sean McNamara
Freelance writer

"Growing up" is not easy for teenagers — especially girls. They are constantly bombarded with suggestions about how to look, talk and choose friends. For many young girls, the pressure to be like everyone else in order to be accepted can be intense.

Debi Housel, religious education administrator at St. Michael's Parish in Newark, has found a way to help junior high girls deal with those pressures.

Housel conducts a two-day retreat titled, "It's Our Turn to Be Special," which helps teens adjust to life's changes.

"It's difficult being a teenager," Housel said. "It's a time of confusion and uncertainty. It's also a time for new experiences, meeting new friends and having more freedom. All this can be very exciting as well as scary."

One of the ways the retreat helps girls feel special is through a beauty make-over. Representatives from Mary Kay Cosmetics, the Hair Zoo and John Robert Powers Modeling School teach the girls poise and the art of "looking good."

"We try to teach them that you have to treat yourself special so you can go out and treat someone else special," Housel said. "They taught us a lot of new things. It was interesting," said Cheryl Hayes, 14, an eighth-grader at St. Theodore's School.

Hayes attended the most recent retreat, which was held at St. Theodore's Parish in February. The first program took place at St. Michael's last summer.

Along with learning how to look good, girls on the retreat also learn how to feel good.

"You learn to respect yourself — to not let anybody hurt you. You let out your feelings and meet other people. I found out what other people think about myself and how I think about myself," said Laura Perry, 14, an eighth-grader at Gates-Chili Middle School.

"Sometimes they need to be separated — to be away and just be girls," Housel said.

The sense of community built up during the retreats helps the girls discuss tough issues. Speakers from such agencies as the Crisis Pregnancy Center, Catholic Family Center and Strong Cancer Research Center helped the girls address such issues as pregnancy, date rape, sexual abuse, death and grieving, drug addiction and eating disorders.

"We have the girls talking with people who have experience with what they are talking about, not people who are just experts," Housel noted.

"These young girls have a lot they want to know about these things and to share about them in their own lives," said Father Anthony P. Mugavero, parochial vicar of St. Theodore's Church. The Gates priest helped present both retreats.

Discussions during the retreat resemble the format seen on the "Donahue" TV show, where audience members present questions to the panel. A trained psychologist moderates the discussion to filter questions that might open a "Pandora's Box," Housel said.

future
faith
friends
beauty
respect

"He (the psychologist) emphasizes the positive and cuts out the unnecessary negative," Housel said.

On the second day of the retreat, participants investigate vocations with a panel of speakers from many walks of life, including singles, religious, married couples and grandparents.

"It made me stop and think about the future — about what to do and what I want to be and what I don't want to be," Hayes said.

In addition to helping girls prepare for the future, the discussion helps them deal with the present. Often times, girls feel their lives are somehow "abnormal," and the discussion helps them realize commonalities, Housel said.

"They would hear other people and say, 'That's what my house is like,'" Housel said.

Feelings start coming out at the end of the first night when a candlelight prayer service takes place.

"That's when the real personal things start to be shared. They are real things that are close to home, sometimes even in their lives. Often, there are tears, yet it is done in such a way that there is a context of stability and warmth," Father Mugavero said.

According to Housel, that warm and stable atmosphere lasts long after the retreat is over. Several of the participants still keep in touch, occasionally meeting for lunch to continue their discussions.

"The retreat is inspiring. In a short period of time, there is an awful lot of opening up to each other," Father Mugavero said, adding that "opening up" is the focus of the retreat.

"These girls are flowers trying to open. They need this to open up in a loving atmosphere," Housel said.



Collage by Babette G. Augustin/Staff Photographer



Nazareth Academy

How do you build self-esteem?

Nancy Hoyt, junior:

Self-esteem is how someone views themselves and how they feel they appear to the world around them. I know how people feel about me by how they act toward me. If they like me and feel I am worth being around, they will hang out with me. If not, they will avoid me.



AS TEENS SEE IT



Marisa Mitrano, junior:

I build up my self-confidence by convincing myself that I can do anything and achieve anything. Having a good self-esteem helps me get along with people. If my self-esteem were low, I would be a burden to people around me. It helps me to survive the life I have right now.



Rachelle Zambito, junior:

You can build your self-confidence by keeping a healthy daily routine, including consuming foods that are nutritious and keeping yourself well-groomed and clean-looking. One might also make sure to do their best and pay attention to only those positive comments that are given to them.



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