

Mercy girls learn to live their faith

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — In an attempt to put into practice what she teaches in theology classes, Sue Clifford implemented the first-ever Mercy Ministry Program at Our Lady of Mercy High School this fall.

For several years, officials at the all-girls high school had been interested in operating seventh and eighth grades, according to Clifford. Last January, the school received approval from the Diocese of Rochester to establish the new grade levels.

Clifford, who is also the coordinator of the seventh- and eighth-grade department at Mercy, decided to institute a ministry program in which her students could work with social service organizations as part of the course's curriculum.

The 60 girls in the two grades make up the social ministry unit. One day a month, students divide into groups and visit 10 different venues. An adult advisor — either a teacher or parent — accompanies each group on its assignment. The advisors serve two purposes: to provide transportation for the students and to involve families and faculty in the program.

Clifford said she originally feared that it would be difficult to recruit parents and teachers as volunteers.

The Mercy teacher said she was pleasantly surprised, however, at how many people volunteered to help.

Coordinating advisors wasn't Clifford's only concern. During the summer, she had to contact several agencies to determine whether organizations had any service work for the girls. She also wanted to see if the groups were interested in being part of the ministry program.



As part of the Mercy Ministry Program, Our Lady of Mercy High School students Laura Clemens, right, and Alicia Nassar work at Bethany House, a shelter for women and children.

"Word got out and several agencies ended up contacting me to see if they could be included," Clifford said.

In September and October, the girls visited such organizations as Bethany House, Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish, St. Michael's Woodshop, Ronald McDonald House, Birthright of Rochester, Melita House, Flower City Habitat for Humanity, St. John the Evangelist School on Humboldt Street, Blossom Road Health Center and Andrew's Center.

Once a month, the girls spend a half day with their respective agencies. Each organization is very different and has a diversity of needs, Clifford said.

At Melita House, a home for unwed pregnant women, the girls helped prepare

the noon meal. Eighth-grader Michelle Fustanio said she was apprehensive about the visit at first.

"At first I was nervous because I knew there would be young people who were pregnant, and I thought I'd be uncomfortable," said the Mercy student.

At the Blossom Road Health Center, students spent time talking with residents or taking them on walks. At St. Michael's Woodshop, the girls sorted wood pieces for picture frames. In addition, the Mercy students have planned a Halloween party at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, installed insulation in houses for Flower City Habitat for Humanity, and tutored children at St. John's.

Many of the girls were unfamiliar with the agencies before their visits.

Kellie Sciacca had no idea what Birthright of Rochester did until she went there to sort baby clothes.

Beth-Anne Diodato and Elizabeth Lenti both cleaned the house and baked cookies at the Ronald McDonald House and were surprised at how much fun they had.

"It was such a warm feeling there. I expected it to be like a hospital, but each kid had a room just like in my house," Diodato said.

At Ronald McDonald House, the girls made cookies for parents to have when they came back from the hospital later that evening. Diodato said she knew her efforts were appreciated when she and her fellow students received a letter of gratitude from the Ronald McDonald House staff.

Jacqui Moran said that knowing she is helping people makes it all worthwhile.

"It was like a big family (at Ronald McDonald House), and they weren't rude to us for coming into what was their home at the moment," Moran commented.

The seventh-grade girls who visited Bethany House of Hospitality, a shelter for abused women and children, canned tomatoes, prepared the evening meal, lined shelves and baked a cake.

Donna Ecker, co-director of Bethany House, said she is thrilled with the project.

"I think it is a wonderful endeavor that the school is doing," Ecker said. "It is good to begin at a young age to let young ladies know that there are many people in their own community who are in need."

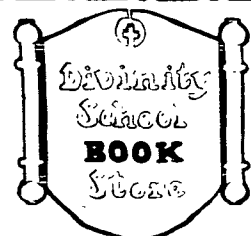
Alicia Nassar said she looks forward to visiting the women and children at Bethany. Andrea Rogalski and Laura Clemens noted that it was nice to serve people who are going to get something out of it.

Beth Prosser, an English teacher at Mercy and adviser to the group that visited Bethany House, said the experience has been great for the girls.

"They get as much out of this as they give — maybe more," Prosser said.

Clifford said she believes the program has been successful so far.

"The girls have seen that their faith means more once they get out and help others," she said. "So we're not just going to sit here and say what we believe — we're going to live it."



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