

Deacon: Don't attach stigma to the disabled

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

RUSH — "I saw what it was like for people to be handicapped and it makes you look at it differently."

That was the realization of Matt Wing, a freshman at Wayne Central School, after he heard Deacon Edward R. Sergeant's presentation concerning attitudes toward people with physical disabilities.

Sergeant's talk was part of the Search Retreat weekend held at the Rotary Sunshine Camp April 5-7. The retreat — offered for the first time to Wayne County youths — was sponsored by St. Mary's of the Lake Church, Ontario, and attended by parish youths from such areas as Sodus, Newark, Clyde/Savannah, Palmyra/Marion, Lyons and Macedon.

During his presentation on April 6, Deacon Sergeant, the director of Pastoral Care at the Newark Developmental Disabilities Service Office, had youths experience what it would be like if they were physically disabled.

Deacon Sergeant began the program by asking the youths if they could ever remember being physically handicapped. After several members of the group admitted that injuries had forced them to use crutches, Deacon Sergeant asked if they considered themselves to be handicapped during that time. Most youths said they did

not.

The Sodus resident made the point that people are only perceived as handicapped when others attach that stigma to them.

"We assume that they are handicapped because they are in a wheelchair, walk with a walker, or have some other sign of a disability," Sergeant said.

He added that it was natural for people to fear those with disabilities because they are different from "normal" people.

The deacon told the 60 retreatants and their group leaders the story of a little girl he once knew named Tammy. The little girl was fully developed from her waste up but had no legs.

As soon as she saw him, "she scooted across the floor and reached up, put her arms around my neck, and it was all I could do to put her down, that's how bad she needed a hug," Deacon Sergeant said.

His meeting with Tammy was a turning point in his life, noted Deacon Sergeant. "From that time on, any and all barriers were gone," he said.

In an effort to break down any of the retreatants' barriers, Deacon Sergeant used a series of exercises to show what it is like to be disabled.

He first asked Wayne Central junior Chris Keller to sit in a wheelchair and try to move across the room. Although he thought the task would be relatively easy,



Chris Orr (right) struggles to understand what Dan Doyle is saying during an exercise on hearing impairment. The exercise was one part of Deacon Edward R. Sergeant's presentation on physical disabilities, which took place during the Search Retreat weekend April 5-7 at the Rotary Sunshine Camp.

Keller admitted that he found it challenging.

"I liked how we got involved," Keller said afterward. "I think that helped a lot."

The next activity generated screams of laughter, as St. Mary's group leader Shirley Snyder volunteered to be tied in the wheelchair. Deacon Sergeant then placed an ice cube down her back, and she had no way of retrieving it.

"When you're in a wheelchair, you're captive. You know what is going to happen, but there is nothing you can do about it," Sergeant explained.

During the next exercise, three group members attempted to carry one of their peers across the room. Jody May of St. Mary's parish said the assignment proved difficult.

"You can't just pick them up anyway because you may hurt them. You have to be gentle, but if you are smaller and the person is heavy, it may be hard," said May, a sophomore at Williamson High School.

Later in his talk, Deacon Sergeant noted that simple tasks can become quite difficult for someone in a wheelchair. In order to get a drink from a water fountain, for example, a person in a wheelchair has to push the button and let the water run down his or her hand. He added that putting a coin into the slot of a pay phone can also pose problems.

In order to demonstrate the difficulties that a visually impaired person might experience, the deacon blindfolded several volunteers and asked them to pour a glass of water from a pitcher. Although many youths were able to successfully complete the task, others experienced frustration over not being able to see.

Cecil Bartholomew, the group leader from Church of the Resurrection in Fairport, was asked to walk blindfolded to the table where the water pitcher was sitting.

He relied on directions from the rest of the group to help him reach his destination.

In the last series of exercises, Deacon Sergeant dealt with how to communicate with the disabled. He emphasized that people should not assume someone in a wheelchair can't communicate. As an example of how not to handle a situation, Deacon Sergeant told of how he sees waiters or waitresses ask someone else at the table what a person in a wheelchair will eat or yell into the disabled person's ear.

"I don't know what being in a wheelchair has to do with your voice or your hearing," remarked the deacon. "Those of you who work in Ponderosas of Burger Kings, assume they (the disabled) can hear and give them the benefit of the doubt of asking what they'll have."

When the session had ended, many youths said Deacon Sergeant's presentation gave them a lot to think about.

"It was a very influential experience," said T.J. Ikewood of St. Gregory's Parish in Marion. "I learned the mishaps that could happen to a disabled person."

Cindy Smith, a junior at Wayne Central High School and a parishioner of St. Mary's of the Lake, said she now realizes the many difficulties faced by a disabled person every day.

"I learned how simple things like scratching your back, being picked up or being in a restaurant become hard when you are handicapped," noted Smith.

Craig Boyce, a Wayne Central junior, said, "You appreciate people in wheelchairs more because when you see them, you'll know what they are feeling."

Coming to that understanding is part of being a Christian, Deacon Sergeant said.

"Remember the spirit that God put in all of us because each of us is special in some way, and God doesn't make junk," Sergeant reminded the group. "In that spirit of love we must love one another."



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Deacon Ed Sergeant ties Allie Fisher's arms to a wheelchair so that she can experience complete dependence on the help of others.

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