

Social justice shapes youth minister's goals

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

CORNING — Deb Kuehner became interested in working with youths when she lived in Germany three years ago.

Now that she is back in the United States, young people have become more than just an interest to Kuehner — they have become her career.

Kuehner, who began studying social work while in Germany, returned to her home town of Corning three years ago. One of the first things she did was register at St. Vincent DePaul Church, where she discovered a need for religious-education teachers.

The 26-year-old Kuehner said she thought it "would be kind of neat to do something" with parish youths, so she and her husband, Thomas, taught seventh- and eighth-grade religious education for two years.

After that stint, Deb Kuehner began teaching high school religious-education classes to youths in the Corning/Painted Post Roman Catholic Community — made up of St. Mary's, St. Patrick's, St. Vincent DePaul and Immaculate Heart of Mary churches. Kuehner said she soon realized the growing need for more than just religious-education programs for high school students in the area.

When Pat VanDurme stepped down from his position as youth minister for the four parishes in 1988, youths in Corning and Painted Post had no organized youth group to attend. Thanks to an achievement-motivation course she took, Kuehner said she became inspired to form a youth group for the Southern Tier cluster.

"We had to set a goal for ourselves, and decide what we wanted to do and how we were going to obtain the goal," explained Kuehner about her achievement course at Corning Community College. "One of my goals was to be actively working with youth other than through religious ed."

After Father William V. Spilley, pastor of the cluster, accepted Kuehner's proposal for a youth group, she began as a volunteer youth minister in December, 1990.

At first, Kuehner said her main goal was to create interest in the group among the parishes' youth.

After the group developed, Kuehner said she began planning some outreach projects. The youths helped with such parish endeavors as Operation Homefront (for families with loved ones serving in the Persian Gulf), a festival at St. Patrick's Church, and monthly community breakfasts following the teen liturgy at each of the four churches.

Since she was hired as part-time youth



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Deb Kuehner (left), the new youth minister for the Corning/Painted Post Catholic Community, will have help from her younger sister, Krissy Gehl.

minister on July 1, Kuehner has been working on developing new projects for the group. Among other endeavors, she is currently planning a summer social-justice program.

The three-part program will include a trip to the Caritas Mission in Frenchville, Pa., on Aug. 13-15. The first part of the program, which took place on July 1, involved an overnight program designed to enlighten the youths about the plight of the less fortunate, Kuehner said.

During the overnight program, Kuehner had planned for the group to watch the movie *Romero*, but when she was unable to locate a videocassette recorder, she had to quickly change her plans.

So she took the teens outside and said, "It's Jan. 15, it's 10 below zero, where are you going to sleep tonight?"

As they were looking for a place to sleep, group members passed several fast-food restaurants. Although they were supposed to be fasting during the overnight experience, Kuehner said the hungry youths began to beg her to let them buy something to eat.

"I said no, we're not going to do that ... you can't go in and buy something if you are supposed to be fasting and you're supposed to be homeless in the first place," explained Kuehner.

When group members would not stop pleading for food, the youth minister finally

told them they could eat only the food they got from begging.

"They went in to McDonald's and begged and got nothing but ice water," she said. "But they went into Burger King and begged and came out with 12 cheeseburgers, 12 fries and 12 drinks."

Although the youths broke their fast, Kuehner said they ultimately learned a lesson from the experience.

"So they didn't fast, but it was interesting because they kind of felt what it was like to be in that situation ... it made them think more about it," said Kuehner.

During the second part of the program, on July 8 and 15, the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry will present sessions aimed at increasing social awareness both locally and throughout the world.

Following the mission, the youths will

share their experiences with students in the high school religious-education classes.

In addition to an awareness for social justice, Kuehner said today's youths need more guidance in moral issues.

"They hear about it in school but they are so torn because what the church says and what society says (are so different)," noted Kuehner.

Kuehner, who will continue her education at Mansfield University this fall, said she also plans to design programs to help teens deal with family situations, relationships, and substance abuse.

She noted that she won't be alone in her work because her younger sister, Krissy Gehl, has already volunteered to help coordinate activities for the group.

A member of the former youth group, Gehl said she felt a void during her last two years of high school. Although she will not be a group member, Gehl said she is excited about her sister's work in the parishes. In fact, she said she feels partly responsible for Kuehner becoming a youth minister.

"Deb started becoming interested in the group after I asked her to help drive some of our youth group to Darien Lake," recalled 18-year-old Gehl.

Kuehner agreed that Gehl has been a big influence in her new career.

"She was part of the spark," acknowledged Kuehner.

Although a nine-year age difference exists between the two sisters, neither one seems to notice. And just as Gehl may have "sparked" Kuehner's interest in youth ministry, the older sibling appears to have become a role model for the younger one.

"I plan to study social work, and maybe take over Deb's job one day," Gehl said with a smile.

For now the job definitely belongs to Kuehner, who is noticing that the parish youths are beginning to open up to her.

"It took me a long time to figure out what I was going to do," Kuehner said. "But now I feel like I am headed in the right direction."

Sister Wulforst named president of Mercy

ROCHESTER — Sister Carol Wulforst, RSM, has been appointed the first president of Our Lady of Mercy High School, the board of trustees of the Sisters of Mercy recently announced.

As president of the school, Sister Wulforst's responsibilities will include coordinating public relations, communications and development for the school.

Sister Wulforst earned her master's de-

gree in education from Marygrove College in Detroit. She has taught in diocesan elementary schools since 1959. From 1973-76, she was principal of St. Mary's School in Bath, and she also served as principal of St. Joseph's School in Penfield from 1979-87.

Recently, Sister Wulforst served at the Sisters of Mercy mission in Santiago, Chile.

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