

Teens find personal growth at summer camp

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

ITALY VALLEY, N.Y. — When 18 teens traveled to Kamp Koinonia for a one-week stint during Family Camp, they didn't realize that hard work could be so much fun.

But they found out — fast.

The 18 teens from the Rochester and Buffalo dioceses volunteered to staff the second week of the Family Camp program from July 28-Aug. 3. The recruits learned that they could love their work even though their tasks required constant attention.

Upon their arrival at the camp, the youths were assigned to one of 13 families attending the weeklong program. In addition, they each took responsibility for watching over a group of children.

Laurie Orman, site coordinator of Family Camp, said the teens took their job seriously and performed their duties tirelessly.

"Actually they are never really off and having free time," explained Orman. "They are always around if families need them for anything."

She added, "They are on (the job) constantly, more than I am. They are on the go from the time they get up."

The teen staff — including youths from St. Margaret Mary's, St. Pius X and St. Joseph's, all of Rochester, as well as St. Anne's in Palmyra, and All Saints in Lansing — coordinated morning activities for the children in their group. Activities ranged from playing in a sandbox to having group discussions, depending on the age of the children.

After noon Mass and lunch, the teens supervised children during the "freetime" period, when they took them to the pool, coordinated an activity in the Arts and Crafts Lodge or organized a volleyball game.

The teens were busy again after dinner, babysitting the children in their individual cabins while parents attended prayer and discussion sessions.

Some parents, such as Mary Ann and Steven Kwiatkowski, said they would not have been able to attend any of the camp events for adults if the teen staffers hadn't helped out. In fact, the Kwiatkowskis referred to their helpers, Ellen Mooney of St. Anne's and Lisa Freemesser of St. Joseph's, as "lifesavers."

The mother of 8-year-old Matthew and 5-year-old Elizabeth, Mary Ann said that the youths' help enabled her to leave her cabin — and her worries — behind after she put her children to bed in the evenings.

"It's nice to put them to bed and know that if my daughter yells 'mommy' I don't have to be there because she'll be just as happy with the girls," said Mary Ann. "I don't worry about it at all — once I leave the cabin I know they are fine."

The Kwiatkowskis noted that the teen volunteers made their camping experience more of a vacation.

"If I was staying in a hotel I would still have to watch my kids every moment of the day and know exactly where they are," explained Mary Ann.

Steven added, "Here there is another four eyes watching them."

According to Father David W. Mura, parochial vicar of St. Michael's Church in Penn Yan and one of the camp's spiritual directors, the teens are key to the camp program's success.

"The teen staff is an incentive for families who are bringing their teenage children who don't want to do all that 'church business,'" said Father Mura. "And for those families bringing young kids, then they have 20 new brothers or sisters."

In addition to the praise they receive from families and adult staff, the teens said the program offers many personal rewards. Evan Wilson, a parishioner of St. Joseph's Church in Penfield, said he decided to return to camp after enjoying his experiences



Phillip Archer/Photo Intern

Teen counselor Cheryl Battisti holds camper Barry Zachary during a group sing-along at Kamp Koinonia. The 18 teen counselors coordinate group activities, supervise children during free periods and babysit for individual children while their parents attend prayer or discussion sessions.



Camper Rob Schwalm shares a quiet moment with teen counselor Melissa Mura during Family Camp at Italy Valley's Kamp Koinonia.

so much last summer.

Wilson, who was assigned to watch the fourth- and fifth-graders, said he talked about vocations with his group. He also helped them make cards for their parents, among other activities.

Besides meeting new friends and rekindling old relationships, Wilson said the camp program allows him to do things he doesn't have the opportunity to do at home.

"You get to hang around with little babies," said the Penfield High School senior.

Bob Kilinski, who heard about the program through Wilson, said he found his work with the kindergarten and first-graders very challenging.

"It's sort of hard to keep them doing what we are doing and to stick to the subjects," said the St. Joseph's parishioner, who said he talked about vocations and the Eucharist with his group members.

But the experience was an eye-opener for the Penfield senior.

"I always thought that I hated them (little kids) — I wouldn't really get along with them," acknowledged Kilinski. "But I actually do — I like working with them and babysitting them at night."

Kilinski said he took seriously the responsibility of offering the parents a break from their normal routine.

"If the kids are acting up during church, we take them for a walk outside to cool them down," noted Kilinski. "We just leave them (the parents) undisturbed...we

are just taking the burden off of their shoulders."

Family Camp is not a new experience for Mike Radel, an eighth-grader at St. Aloysius Catholic School in Cheektowaga, a suburb of Buffalo. A camper with his family since 1986, Radel decided to return this summer as a staff member even though his family was unable to attend.

"Over the last four or five years I have grown much closer to God, and I have used the things I have learned here about God in my life every single day," said Radel.

Cheryl Battisti, a junior at the State University of New York College at Geneseo, said she looked forward to returning to Family Camp this year because the program allows her the chance to regroup.

"I just came back so relaxed and I felt so good," said Battisti about her camp experience last year. "It comes to the point in your summer where you come back from school and you work and you've got to get out. It's a nice break and I don't get anything like this except for here."

Almost all of the teens said they plan to volunteer again for next year's Family Camp program. And although the teens provide invaluable services for the families, Battisti said the staffers definitely gain their own rewards.

"It gives you a new perspective... You learn how to open up and trust really quick," explained the Bishop Kearney graduate. "And whenever you see them (the families) again in a mall or you write them a Christmas card, it's just a nice warm feeling you get."

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