

Group gives teens break from life's pressures

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Sometimes, teenagers can feel boxed in, surrounded by walls of pressure. Some of those walls are erected by school teachers, parents, and friends, while others are put up by everyone from the neighborhood bully to the drug dealer on the street corner.

St. Michael's Parish, 869 N. Clinton Ave., gives growing young men and women a chance to escape the pressure box of life from time to time. The parish youth group, coordinated by 25-year-old Mary De Jesus, spends a good deal of time at each of its meetings discussing questions the teenagers place in a box at the beginning of the night.

"When we talk about our problems, I get a lot of advice," said Tayrin Concepcion, a 10th-grader at East High School. "I think that's my favorite part."

Concepcion was having trouble getting along with her boyfriend when she turned to the St. Michael's youth group for advice.

"I wouldn't communicate to him. I wouldn't open up," she said. "(The youth group) told me to open up, and it would get better, and it did get better."

The dozen-or-so core members of the youth group get better and better all the time at sharing their insights, remarked De Jesus, who re-started the group in the fall of 1989.

"They were shy at first, but now it's hard to keep them shut," she joked.

At their meeting last Wednesday night, Oct. 16, the teenagers obviously relished the chance to open up and talk about everything from why they have problems get-



Jose Torres (left) and Carmelo Santiago lead a discussion of issues from the 'box' (bowl), which members fill with questions before the start of youth-group sessions at St. Michael's Church.

Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

ting along with their parents to how they feel they are treated by teachers at school.

"Why do so many people judge books by their cover?" was one of the questions pulled from the box. The group members agreed with De Jesus that everyone unjustly pre-judges others solely on their looks from time to time.

Carmelo Santiago, a ninth-grader at School Without Walls, recalled a fellow student of his who came from a poor family and dressed in shabby clothes.

But those who ignored the student because of his poor appearance misjudged the true wealth he possessed, Santiago asserted, noting the student's good grades in school.

"He didn't have very much at home, but what he had in his mind would get him through life," Santiago said.

This insight led the students, most of whom are Puerto Rican, to talk about what it's like to be stereotyped by some of their teachers and other authority figures. Many of the group members feel older people treat them differently because of their ethnic background. Santiago thinks their youthful age also plays into the stereotyping.

"I think when they hear the word 'teenager,' they think of hoodlums," he observed.

Far from being hoodlums, these teen-

agers are the Catholic Church of today, De Jesus argued. One of the founders of the youth group more than nine years ago when she was in high school herself, De Jesus explained the importance of ministering to young boys and girls as they go through the pains of becoming young men and women.

"I feel that youth group is a carryover from confirmation," she said. Too few parishes actively follow up on the students following their confirmation, she added. "I feel that's where we lose them. You don't have anyone specially caring for them."

Her own life exemplified the problems created by an uncaring church, she recalled. De Jesus was always an active Catholic at St. Michael's in her teen years. But when the 18-year-old De Jesus went to Columbia University in New York City, she not only left behind her family and friends, she left behind her faith.

Unlike her home parish, the Catholic churches she found in the area surrounding Columbia were cold and uninviting.

"They didn't invite people to celebrate," she said, noting that participation had underpinned her Catholicism at St. Michael's. "I was doing readings at 13, 14," she said.



Mary De Jesus has been an integral part of the youth group since the fall of 1989.

She stopped going to Mass regularly and found few people at her school who cared to persuade her to go. But when she moved back to Rochester, she also returned to the warm embrace of her faith, she said.


De Jesus now wants to share that embrace with her young charges in the youth group, who often play a variety of roles in St. Michael's liturgical celebrations.

"I think they're alive now," De Jesus said. "They should participate."



Thais Concepcion listens to comments made by fellow members during the 'box' discussion.

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