

Auburn youths promote unity through diversity

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

AUBURN — Andy Vieira is 18, doesn't attend school and is out of work.

In addition, he described his life experiences as having been "a lot more, I think, than my share to deal with."

To him, BUNGY represents "the only thing in my life right now that's scheduled and predicted."

Shawn Lynch, 16, is one of the few African-American members who attend BUNGY. One Tuesday last month, he came to a meeting after enduring racial tensions among his peers. The problems began when several dozen students staged a walkout earlier that day to protest the proposed renaming of Auburn High School after Harriet Tubman (1820-1913), U.S. abolitionist and Auburn native.

"Outside, they said racist stuff," recalled Shawn, a sophomore at Auburn High. "When I came to BUNGY, I was yelling at everybody and almost crying."

With the support of BUNGY members, however, Shawn felt better by the end of the day.

"It did help, actually. It helped a lot," Shawn commented.

Doug Yankton serves as a BUNGY volunteer adult leader. Yankton, who is separated, not only stays actively involved with BUNGY but also uses the time to see his children Melissa, 10, and Curtis, 13, who also belong to BUNGY.

"They live with their mother, so it's an opportunity to be with the kids," Doug explained.

So what, exactly, is BUNGY, you ask? A magical potion that can make all the struggles in one's life instantly go away? Well, the problems don't totally disappear, and no, there's no magic involved.

But there is a lot of faith and spirituality running through BUNGY, and that



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Kathy Fuchs (far left), who serves as youth minister at St. Alphonsus and St. Mary's Church in Auburn, leads a March 21 rehearsal for "Pierce the Darkness," a play which focuses on teenage morals and values.

in itself can help make a bad day better.

The "potion," so to speak, is simply the support provided by BUNGY members themselves, according to 16-year-old Joelle Anderson.

"You can talk to anybody. They don't care about your past; they care about you now," she commented.

This attitude pervades the entire group. Even though Andy and Shawn endure their own personal problems, for instance, they also don't hesitate to provide a hug for whomever may need one.



Crystal Lupo (left) and Tabitha Hall narrate a modern version of the 'Prodigal Son' during the March 21 rehearsal. Youth-group members recently performed the play at two Auburn parishes.

"It's an accepting place," Crystal Lupo, 16, said of BUNGY. "You can be whoever you want to be."

BUNGY — an acronym for Based Upon the Needs of God — is a youth group of mostly parishioners at St. Alphonsus Church, 95 E. Genesee St., and St. Mary's Church, 15 Clark St.

Kath Fuchs, who serves as youth minister at both parishes, noted that her contingent is diverse, to say the least.

"Some are active and go to church with their families; some are Catholic but don't go to church; and some who are not Catholic just come anyway," said Fuchs. "We plant a seed, and who knows?"

BUNGY began forming approximately two years ago and has gone from "very, very small meetings in the beginning," according to Joelle, to an active group of dozens of teenagers.

Although the St. Alphonsus and St. Mary's teens enjoy fun activities such as pizza parties, they have also undertaken more serious projects as well. BUNGY members, for example, recently presented a play, *Pierce the Darkness*, at both churches. Written and directed by Fuchs, the play focused on the morals held by modern teenagers and adults.

Proceeds from those shows helped trim expenses for an upcoming trip to Myrtle Beach, where they will perform a Habitat for Humanity service project.

Fuchs noted that the youths' many efforts would not have been possible without the blessings of adults at St. Alphonsus and St. Mary's.

"The churches have been very supportive," she said.

Still, no matter how busy BUNGY becomes in its outreach work, this group's foundation will always be based upon what members provide for each other.

"It's a lot of loving and caring. You have everything you ever wanted," Joelle concluded.

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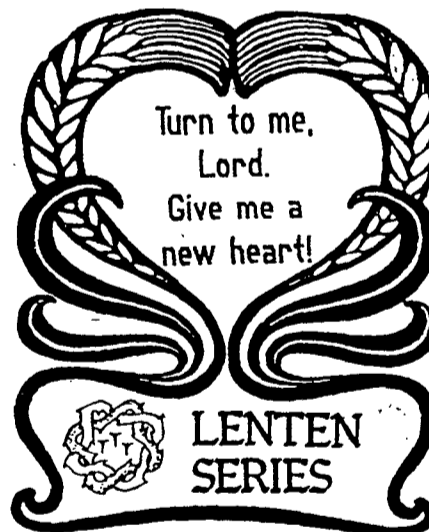
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