

YOUTH

Former prisoners find compassion at youth event

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

BRIGHTON — This "lock-in" lasted just one night for the 35 teenagers.

For seven of the adults, however, the mock incarceration was a reminder of much longer periods of time actually spent behind bars.

Members of seven Monroe County youth groups convened at St. Thomas More Church Friday and Saturday, Oct. 6-7, for an overnight gathering. The "lock-in" format followed a model that has become popular among youth groups, yet this event had a serious side.

Titled "Called to Be Peacemakers And Apostles of Christ," the program focused on a sharing session between youth-group members and adults who have served jail time for such crimes as drug possession and robbery.

Now on parole, these former prisoners appeared at the lock-in on behalf of Cephas, a Rochester-based organization that provides support services for parolees.

The adults who visited St. Thomas More shared stories about their pasts, discussing the teenage struggles that led them to commit crimes. In turn, many teen participants acknowledged — often tearfully — that they currently confront many of the same challenges in their own lives.

"They're dealing with highly dysfunctional families, immense peer pressure, not being accepted for the decisions they make anywhere. They end up in massive confusion," stated Carmen Quinones, youth minister of St. Thomas More.

Yet such opportunities as church youth groups enable these teens to gain acceptance that may not be easily attainable elsewhere, Quinones added.

"(The presenters) were saying that before they went to prison, they didn't



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Teens mingle with adult speakers during an icebreaker activity Oct. 6 at St. Thomas More Church.

have anywhere to 'let it out.' These kids do," said Quinones.

Youths who attended the lock-in said they were pleased they could view these adults as fully alive people, not simply ex-prisoners.

"It went against anything you'd ever been taught about people in prison," said Jeff Reed, 16, a parishioner at Henrietta's Church of the Good Shepherd. "I thought they'd be hardened — people who didn't show emotion, who didn't let anything in or let anything out. This proved me wrong."

"They really broke the stereotypes portrayed on TV — that they're these rough and tough people," said Jeanne Kidera, 14, a St. Thomas More parishioner.

"It was like they were one of us," added 15-year-old Teri Eilers of Good Shepherd. "We were all sharing each other's pain that everybody has to go through. Everybody cared about you when you were talking. It wasn't like (the former prisoners) were just there."

"The violence is hyped up so much in the media, that you never realize the people who commit these crimes are human beings," Quinones said.

The program also included a 3 a.m. Mass celebrated by Father Brian Cool, parochial vicar at Fairport's St. John of Rochester Church. Other parish youth contingents attending the lock-in came




Jeff Reed (from left), Peri Eilers and Mark Valone, all from Henrietta's Good Shepherd Church, share a light moment during an icebreaker activity.

from Our Lady Queen of Peace, Brighton; Holy Cross, Rochester; St. Louis, Pittsford; St. Mary's, Scottsville; and St. John of Rochester, Perinton.

Although the lock-in lasted 14 hours, Quinones said the sharing that took place had the potential to last much longer.

"I'm talking about deep, emotional stuff. We could have gone on for days," Quinones remarked.

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