

Story by Mike Latona

Photographs by Matthew Scott

Life with a smile

full recovery.

Being able to apply his training at such a crucial moment, Eric said, "feels good. It feels really good."

Much in the same way that Eric was influenced by family members, Teresa Zawacki's road to volunteerism was paved by the example of her mother and father.

During her younger years, Teresa worked to jail inmates. Those cards were then delivered by her parents, Stan and Veronica. When she turned 16, Teresa became more directly involved in prison ministry, traveling to medium-security correctional facilities in Albion, Orleans County, and Groveland, Livingston County. There, she met with prisoners who were serving time for such crimes as drug possession, parole violation and child abuse.

Teresa made these visits in 1995, one year after her father had died suddenly. She said she often thought of her dad - who had been an active prison-ministry leader and promoter in the diocese - while chatting with inmates.

"I saw what my dad saw in them. There's a lot of potential to bring God into their lives," recalled Teresa, 18, from Holy Trinity Church in Webster.

Teresa marveled at how greatly the inmates appreciated her visitation teams' efforts.

"These weekends change their lives and their outlooks. They'll tell you they're going to turn around," Teresa said. "They get stereotyped so much ... to know there are a few people who care and put an effort in for them,

they're absolutely elated."

Jena Gullo's care and effort recently took her all the way to another country. The Catholic from Fredonia assisted poor families in Guatemala May 21-June 3 as part of a group from the State University of New York College at Geneseo.

Five Newman, along with Geneseo State Newman Community campus minister David Desmond, helped repair homes in a rural community near the city of Antigua.

It's also giving to yourself -- the feeling that you can make a difference in this world."

-Jena Gullo

Though Jena had been an active volunteer in high school, she said her experience in Central America brought her to a brand-new level.

"I broadened my horizons and my expectations of myself. It was definitely the experience of a lifetime," said Jena, 20, who is entering her junior year at Geneseo. "We just learned so much, and how much we (Americans) take for granted. There's so much need out there."

Certainly, the experiences of Eric, Teresa and Jena have taken them many miles and provided them with long-

lasting memories. Yet there are also countless volunteer opportunities for teens in their own communities:

visiting nearby hospitals or nursing homes; devoting a Saturday to help beautify a Catholic parish; helping with an annual charity fundraising drive, etc.

"An hour a week is not that much at all. You could give it up from your TV time," said Chris Janiak, 18, a recent McQuaid Jesuit High School graduate.

During his sophomore year, Chris began volunteering at Rochester's Strong Memorial Hospital in the patient discharge area as part of a mandatory 40-hour school service project.

"You got to see a lot of babies. It was great," recalled Chris, from St. Rita's Church in Webster.

After the project was completed, Chris not only continued on at Strong, but he also made regular stops at the St. Joseph's Convent Infirmary where he visited retired nuns and priests.

Volunteering, Chris remarked, "is a great way to meet people. And it makes you feel good about yourself."

"It gives you such a great feeling, helping people to this extent," Jena added. "And it's so much more. It's also giving to yourself - the feeling that you can make a difference in this world."

Eric in Tioga County stressed that truly committed volunteers do not seek recognition for their efforts. He said that he and his friends received many civic honors for helping save Amy's life - but they were a little uncomfortable with all the hoopla.

"Just the fact that she's alive is award enough," Eric commented. "All we ever wanted was a hug from her, which we got."

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Most teens heed call to help, study shows

According to David Desmond, teens "very rarely initiate a volunteer project on their own. But if you say, 'Hey, here's something we can do,' they'll line up wanting to help you with it."

Desmond, the Newman Community campus minister at the State University of New York College at Geneseo, said that adults need to encourage that eagerness to respond.

"Sometimes we say, 'Let's wait until they're older.' But they're ready now," Desmond commented. "They're waiting for things to do."

Desmond's remarks are backed up a 1994 national study that revealed that most Americans ages 12-17 perform weekly volunteer activities. The report was compiled by Independent Sector, a group of 800 charitable, educational and related organizations.

Independent Sector reported that its information on teenage volunteerism came from surveys conducted by The Gallup Organization, Inc. and from a national workshop-conference held in 1994.

According to the report, "America's Teen-Agers as Volunteers," of the nation's 12- to 17-year-olds:

- 61 percent were involved in volunteer activities, devoting an average of three hours and 12 minutes per week.
- 74 percent of all teens reported being members of a religious institution, and 67 percent of them were volunteers. This compares with 42 percent who were volunteers among those who were not church or synagogue members.
- 70 percent of teens who attended religious services weekly were volunteers, compared to 63 percent among those who attended once or twice a month and 48 percent for those who attended only a few times a year.

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Courier

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