

Priests make 'Skiing Saints' out of high schoolers

By Michelle Zotter
Catholic News Service

DETROIT — Fathers Joe Ferens and William Brennan want high school students to learn there's more to the world than just what's beyond their school doors in Detroit.

So for almost 40 years they've been offering youths a chance to discover and explore a part of the Rocky Mountains at almost no cost. Each year they take a group on a ski trip.

The two Detroit archdiocesan priests began taking two or three young people at a time to Aspen, Colo., in 1960, explained Father Brennan, 71, pastor of St. Sebastian Parish, a 2,200-family parish in subur-

ban Dearborn Heights.

Today the number of young people participating is 32; two groups of 16 go to Aspen in January for one week each.

The only cost to the students is transportation — by train — and souvenirs. Father Ferens, who is now retired, and Father Brennan cover the costs of lodging, food, ski rentals and instruction.

"If they can afford it, that's fine," Father Brennan told *The Michigan Catholic*, newspaper of the Detroit Archdiocese. "If not, then it doesn't make much of a difference."

Why Aspen? "It's a great place to ski," said Father Brennan, who has been skiing since he was 35. Besides, the owners of the lodge where they stay every year, Ralph and Marianne Melville, offer them big price breaks.

"They believe in this," he added. "The lodge takes what we can afford. They really like the kids. They've been good to us all these years."

In turn, the students help out at the lodge by setting the table, shoveling snow and bringing in the firewood.

Father Brennan decides which students get to go. "I choose them," he said. "Some need it, and some are just good. I see them in church."

Father Ferens said, "It's important for them to learn that there are other people in the world and to let them learn how to associate with people, to help them to grow to realize that there's more than just their own little world they live in. It gives them an opportunity for mature growth."

Forty years ago it was Father Ferens who convinced Father Brennan to go skiing.

"I started skiing when I was invited out by two priests, and then I bugged him all year to come out," Father Ferens recalled. "He wouldn't do it. The following year he said, 'OK, I'll just try it.' I told him that if

he didn't like it, I wouldn't bug him anymore. We went out one time and he was hooked."

Father Brennan enjoyed it so much that he thought it would be a great experience for youths, too. He thought "it would give kids something to hang on to," he said.

Three sets of parents are also asked along to chaperone. They also help with the cooking.

"In the last few years, we've saved money on food," Father Brennan said. "We cook our own dinner." Their meals include spaghetti, hot dogs and lasagna.

For easy identification, each student is given a matching blue ski jacket that Father Brennan provides for them. Embroidered on each one is "Skiing Saints," which was Father Ferens' idea.

Once the jackets have served their purpose, Father Brennan donates them to the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

Most of the money for the trips is raised by Father Brennan, who builds and sells grandfather clocks and other handicrafts. He builds the clocks in his garage. He also built the altar and pulpit in his church.

The clocks take about two months to make. Three of them are the major prizes in the parish festival's raffle every May.

Money also comes in from people they

meet on their trips.

"In fact, one year, I don't even know this guy, but he saw the kids and he sent me \$2,000," he recalled. "It says to me that people are impressed. The kids behave themselves and they're courteous."

Some of the same kids can go to Aspen up to four times "if they behave themselves," he said. "But we have new ones every year. It's not strictly from the parish."

Father Ferens added, "They experience and meet people from all over the country and so there's different cultures, ideas, and it helps them to grow up and give them something they can't receive by living in one area."

Father Brennan receives many letters of gratitude from the students.

One from Laura VanAssche said, "I am a true believer that experiences build on each other and help to create the inner person. In life, we are exposed to so many experiences. Sometimes, however, some are out of our reach. That is, until it lands right on your lap because someone thought you were special enough to be exposed to something."

By being asked to go to Aspen, Father Brennan "enabled me to climb a mountain and come down a better person," he added.

Thoughts to Consider



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A child may be quite upset when a pet dies. One way you can help is to plan a ceremony with the child for saying goodbye. A pet funeral gives the child a feeling of being in control and allows him to express some feelings about the loss. Finding a box to place the pet in, digging a grave, and holding a ceremony also satisfies a child's natural curiosity about the physical aspects of death.

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Trained volunteers will assist seniors with completing Medicare claim forms or making appeals regarding Medicare payments. Information is also available on

health insurance and medical bills.

To schedule an appointment for this free and confidential service, call 716/274-7810.

This service is being offered by Unity Health System — an alliance of St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester and Park Ridge — in cooperation with the Health Advocacy Service, a coalition of health and senior citizens groups.



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