

ON THE MOVE

Story by Mike Latona

Photos by Mike Mergen

On the Move

God is good



Caroline Landers, who did not attend the conference, greets Melanie McMahon on her return from St. Louis.

It had all the fervor of, perhaps, a Super Bowl or Backstreet Boys concert. Tens of thousands of young people, shouting and chanting together. That this level of excitement could occur at a religious event was a pleasant discovery for Leah Cochol.

"I've always had a very close relationship with God, but knowing that there are (so many) teens out there with the same faith as I do amazes me," remarked Leah, 17, a parishioner at St. Mary's Church in Canandaigua.

Leah was among 500 teens and 115 adults from the Rochester Diocese who attended the National Catholic Youth Conference, held Nov.



Teens who attended the convention sing and dance upon returning to the Greater Rochester International Airport, Nov. 21.

18-21 in St. Louis, Mo. The conference attracted 22,500 youths and adult chaperons.

The diocese had a powerful presence in St. Louis. According to Michael Theisen, diocesan coordinator of youth ministry, Rochester took the fourth-largest group of any part of the country — and the largest outside Missouri.

The conference included a series of workshops, guest speakers, musical presentations, liturgies and other prayer sessions.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark also attended the conference, mingling frequently with the Rochester youths and giving the homily at the Region II (New York state) liturgy Nov. 19. The bishop is episcopal liaison to the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry.

Theisen said he was impressed by the volume of youth leadership at the conference. He cited 16-year-old Craig Kielburger, an NCYC-speaker who founded *Free the Children*, an international youth organization that seeks to free children from poverty and exploitation. Following Craig's inspiring presentation, Theisen said he'd like to bring the Canadian teen to speak at the Diocesan Youth Convention next summer.

Katie Best said she was moved by a speaker from Columbine High School in Colorado, who reflected on the shooting rampage last spring that left 15 people dead.

"She looked forward with so much hope, and back with so much reason. It was touching; I cried," said Katie, 15, from St. Pius X Church in Chili.

In general, Gary Haynes said, teens displayed an open spirituality throughout the conference.

"Kids weren't afraid to speak out and share their feelings about God and faith with one another," said Gary, 16, from St. Mary's in Canandaigua.

"Everyone was there for the name of God," Katie added.

Leah said she vocalized her faith in a rather offbeat way. She and two friends blew up her air

mattress while they were still six blocks from their hotel, and proceeded to walk with the mattress through the streets singing "Our God Is An Awesome God."

"As people were passing us in cars, they were taking pictures of us. The looks we got were unforgettable," Leah said. "We were spreading God's word ... the power of God was just unbelievable."

Leah added that during opening prayer on Nov. 18, participants began a chant that would last throughout the weekend. When one group would

yell "God is good," that was the cue for another group to respond, "All the time!"

According to Brian Creary, the excitement lasted well past sundown.

"When we were praying at night in our group, someone had to come in and tell us to pray quieter," said Brian, 15, from St. Michael/St. Andrew in Penn Yan and Dundee.

Brian said that his NCYC experience gave him direction on his faith journey.

"I hope that going will help me live the life God wants me to live," Brian said.

And Gary, who was also an NCYC participant in 1997, said that attending the conference has spurred his interest in becoming a youth minister.

"Each time it has improved my faith in God and others along the way. I can tell others my feelings toward God and not be embarrassed about it," Gary said. "It's things like this that make me want to ... help other teens experience what I have experienced."

The NCYC is held every two years. Though Rochester had a tremendous turnout in St. Louis, Theisen said that even greater numbers are likely at the next national conference. It will take place in 2001 in Indianapolis, meaning that a more affordable bus option will be available. All of last week's NCYC participants from Rochester traveled by plane.

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