

on the MOVE



Joy-Michelle Ivancie, 16, plays the modern reader at the St. Margaret Mary Living Stations dress rehearsal Feb. 25 in Apalachin. The parts change each performance, so that many of the older students get a chance to play lead roles.

'It shows we love God with all our hearts'

How often do you hear of teens who make plans for Lent while it's still summer? It happens in Apalachin, thanks to the huge popularity of the Living Stations of the Cross at St. Margaret Mary Parish.

Living Stations has been a Lenten tradition at the Tioga County parish for 25 years. It's the marquee youth-group event of the year, current participants say.

"It's almost an expectation. You're in youth group, and Stations is the next step," said Steven Bale, 17.

"I've had to turn down people because we fill up so quickly. They're very disappointed and I'll say to call me in September," said Beth Buczkowski, the fifth-year director who is also St. Margaret Mary's high-school youth minister.

When September does roll around, Buczkowski added, "The phone starts ringing off the hook."

With 12 rehearsals completed since early January, this year's Living Stations is due to begin March 2. The production will involve nearly 50 youths in grades eight-12, as well as several adult assistants.

St. Margaret Mary is among many youth groups in the Rochester Diocese that depict Jesus' suffering and death through the Living Stations. Most such productions are held at the parish level. St. Margaret Mary youth, however, are on the road every Friday during Lent before returning to their home parish for the final Living Stations on Good Friday.

Though most performers are from St. Margaret Mary, Living Stations also features Catholic and non-Catholic teens from other parts of Tioga County and neighboring Broome County. "We have kids who don't belong to any church and hear about this," Buczkowski said.

What generates this strong appeal? Those interviewed, all high-school seniors, say it's the depth to which they immerse themselves in their roles. In addition, by rotating their portrayals of Biblical figures, they get to see the Passion from many perspectives. "They become that person," Buczkowski said.

For instance, Lara Jeremko, 18, said she realized that through playing Veronica — the woman depicted at the sixth station as wiping Jesus' face — that "this person was really scared and had to have courage."

The group also takes a certain amount of creative license, Jeff Sryca and Jamie Laubisch noted.

"No one year is the same," remarked Jeff, 18.

"We try to add different things, different expressions. We try to feel in our hearts what really happened," added Jamie, 18.

Teens provide all singing and instrumentals. Buczkowski is always looking for musical talent; for instance, this year she's using a first-time participant, 17-year-old Dave Roeber. "I found out he plays the guitar," Buczkowski remarked.

The group has further personalized its performances by adding a "modern reader" in recent years. That person describes Jesus' passion from the perspective of someone who's been sent back from 2001 to biblical times.

"When I first started there wasn't a modern reader. It's so much more moving (for the audience) to have someone to relate to," Jeff said.

Modern readers, Lara added, "kind of say what you hope the audience is thinking."

These adaptations, Buczkowski said, are designed so that



Weeping women Natalie Zaparzynski, 17, (left) and Cynthia Lysczek, 17, carry the body of Jesus.

Scheduled appearances

- March 2 - St. Andrew's, Binghamton
- March 9 - St. James, Waverly
- March 16 - Our Lady of Angels, Endwell
- March 23 - Elmira Correctional Facility
- March 30 - St. Catherine's, Binghamton
- April 6 - St. Joseph, Endicott
- April 13 - St. Margaret Mary, Apalachin

All starting times are 7 p.m., with the exception of 6:30 on April 6 and 7:30 on April 13.

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PHOTOS BY ANDREA DIXON



Greg Barbieri, 16, playing a crowd member here, points an accusing finger at Jesus.

those in attendance receive as intimate a portrayal as possible. "It was important to try to bring the people (in the pews) into it," she said.

The teens say they've accomplished that mission during past performances at the Elmira Correctional Facility, where they're due to return March 23. Many inmates, they said, are moved to tears by the Living Stations.

Whomever the audience, Steven said, the group strives to show its spirituality. "In a world that sometimes puts down teenagers as punks and hoodlums, we do have faith," he stated.

"We show that we love God with all our hearts, and we love doing this for him," said Jamie Winters, 18. "It's the greatest thing, when people come out the door and thank you."

Jamie added that her Living Stations experience has changed her dramatically, saying, "It's affected my whole life. I was very low in my faith, but this has helped me to go on."

Asked if the rehearsal and traveling schedule ever become too rigorous, the teens issued an emphatic "no."

"It's never been a drain. You'd think that it would be, but it's so much fun," Lara said. "It's an awesome group of people, and an awesome way of sharing with others what happened to Jesus."

COMING NEXT WEEK: Sectional sports coverage