



A group plays the Island Game during a multi-parish Hispanic youth rally May 11 at Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier Church, Rochester.

## A rallying cry for Hispanic youth

Story by Mike Latona

Photos by Karin von Voigtlander

**W**hirling and twirling to the music, hopping excitedly from one partner to the next, Javier Ortiz seemed ready to dance the night away in his parish hall at Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier.

Xavier, St. Michael's, and Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Teens also attended from Rochester's Our Lady of Perpetual Help and Holy Apostles, and a few came from Henrietta's Church of the Good Shepherd.

Throughout the night, organizers frequently shouted, "Wazzup?" and teens responded, "Jesus!" Pulsating Spanish dance tunes and some offbeat activities enhanced the energy level.

To emphasize teamwork, for example, teens divided into small groups and made curiously-shaped configurations of marshmallows and uncooked pasta strands. To encourage social interaction, they filled out "accident reports" — the term used for recording numerous names of fellow participants on a pad of paper.

During the two prayer sessions, teens broke out into joyful songs. Free pizza, snacks and prizes helped keep the mood flowing.

"They organized it pretty good so we could all get along and have fun," Javier commented.

Some thought-provoking moments came during a talk by Liz Guevara of the American Red Cross. She gave an impassioned talk urging rally participants to realize their potential by joining the Red Cross Hispanic Youth Leadership Program.

Moses Rivera, 13, said he enjoyed the rally because he was "together with people we don't know, who are also our brothers and sisters." He, along with Jonathan Santos and Yversha Roman, were among the participants from St. Michael's. Yversha, 16, said she attended because of "my interest in the church, to represent St. Michael's, and to show that youth do care. No matter how hard you try, there's always people saying youth don't care."

The St. Michael's trio also said that people from outside the city have misconceptions of their environment.

"The city is not that bad," commented Jonathan, 13. He said that crime levels are comparatively high, but teens can stay on track by choosing wisely and avoiding temptations.

"We're all neighbors of Jesus Christ. We

lead the same lives as anyone else," Yversha added. "No matter who you are, we love God just the same."

"We want to show that we have great kids," said Dee Cruz, an event co-organizer. Other organizers were youth ministers Yolanda Ortiz (Mount Carmel), Elizabeth Munoz (Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier) and Martha Montes (St. Michael's); along with Michael Theisen, diocesan coordinator of youth ministry; and Gabriela Jaramillo, diocesan director of the Spanish Apostolate.

Cruz said the rally marked the first multi-parish youth event in quite some time for Rochester's Hispanics. "We're not used to doing things like that. Each church, usually, stands alone," she said.

According to Jaramillo, the rally reflects an increased effort by the Rochester Diocese to accentuate Hispanic youths.

"Hopefully it's one of many events to come," Jaramillo said.

Another key step was the hiring of Cruz in September to serve as part-time youth coordinator for the six churches in the City Center East planning group. Along with the Community of Hope cluster, these churches include Our Lady of Perpetual Help, St. Bridget's and Corpus Christi.

Hispanics have accounted for 71 percent of Catholic Church growth since 1960, according to a report the U.S. bishops released last year. And in the Rochester area, they make up the fastest-growing community, according to the U.S. Census.

Cruz said her next goal is to plan a City Center East youth retreat. She is also promoting inclusion of Hispanic youth in numerous diocesan-wide events.

"We're glad that the diocese is making Hispanics a part of things," Cruz said.



Alexandra Montes, 19, (left) of St. Francis Xavier, and Deemairi Rivera, 18, also of St. Francis Xavier, work with a group to create a structure from spaghetti noodles and jumbo marshmallows.



Johany Morales, 6, of St. Francis Xavier hugs Elizabeth Rivera, 15, also of St. Francis Xavier.

"This is important. If I wasn't here, I'd just be hanging out at the movies or something. I'd rather be here meeting other people," Javier said.

Javier, 16, regularly attends Friday evening youth group gatherings at his Rochester parish. On May 11, Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier was joined by numerous visitors for the first-ever "Convivencia para Jovenes" Hispanic youth rally. Nearly 60 youths, ages 13-18, along with several adult volunteers, filled the hall for a three-hour evening of fun and prayer.

"I like how I got to meet people from other parishes. I got along good with people I didn't know," Javier said.

Most participants came from the Community of Hope cluster, which includes Holy Redeemer/St. Francis

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