

ON THE MOVE

STORY BY MIKE LATONA

PHOTOS BY ANDREA DIXON



Parishioners of St. Pius V Church in Cohocton cast curious looks at "homeless" Ryan McKelvey, 14, and Molly Share, 13, both of Holy Family Catholic Community, lying in a cardboard box in front of the church Sept. 30.



Jennifer Austin, 15, Nicole Thurling, 17, and Marie Clarcq, 17, huddle outside St. Pius V.

This was no ordinary slumber party.

A sleep-over on the floor of a chilly room, with minimum nourishment, was plenty enough for teens in the Holy Family Catholic Community to get a taste of homelessness.

"It's hard to believe there are so many people who do that every day for most of their lives," said Marie Clarcq, 17, who attends St. Pius V Church in Cohocton.

Marie was one of 12 youth-group members from the Holy Family cluster who

took part in the "Homeless Experience" Sept. 29-30. The event not only raised awareness about the plight of the homeless, it also raised funds. According to Linda Mehlenbacher, Holy Family's youth minister, the teens collected a stunning \$3,200 for charity during weekend Masses.

The group, which slept overnight Sept. 29 at the parish center of Sacred Heart, Perkinsville, circulated to all four Holy Family churches in search of donations: St. Mary's, Dansville (5:15 p.m. Saturday); Sacred Heart (7 p.m. Saturday); St. Joseph's, Wayland (7:30 a.m. Sunday); and St. Pius V, Cohocton (9 a.m. Sunday). To simulate homeless conditions, most youths sat in cardboard boxes outside the churches as parishioners entered for Mass and exited. Other teens went inside at each liturgy to take up special collections by passing around firemen's hats and boots.

Funds will aid relief efforts in response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States. The money had been earmarked for local food pantries, but Mehlenbacher said the group changed its focus after learning that other area organizations had come forward to help the pantries.

"We saw a lot of twenties (20-dollar bills)," said Sacred Heart's Molly Share, 13.

In between the Saturday and Sunday Masses, the teens stayed overnight at Sacred Heart's parish hall. They had a scant supper of soup and crackers by a bonfire; moved inside to watch the 1989 movie "Romero" (a biography of Archbishop Oscar Romero, a human-rights activist in El Salvador who was slain in 1980); and then went to bed.

"Bed," in this case, was a thinly carpeted cement floor. Each participant was allowed only one pillow and one blanket, and



Sierra Rounsville, 15, outside of St. Pius V.

sleeping bags were a no-no. It wasn't until well past midnight, when temperatures outside had dropped into the 30s, that Mehlenbacher activated the heat.

"I wouldn't want to be a homeless person because it was very hard," Molly said.

"I was freezing all night. I was still pretty cold with two pairs of pants and two sweatshirts," said Jessica Thielges, 15, from St. Joseph's. And yet, Jessica wondered how much greater the struggle must be for homeless people during the wintertime when it's snowing.

Around dawn Sunday morning, the group arose for an oatmeal breakfast before completing its Homeless Experience at the Masses in Wayland and Cohocton.

Although homelessness isn't readily apparent in the Southern Tier, Molly said she's seen homeless people while in Toronto and is moved by their plight. "I'm one of those people who get emotional when I see poor and hurting people," she said.

Sierra Rounsville of St. Mary's noted that her father is a chef, so the Homeless Experience was a far cry from her normal cuisine. The experience, she said, reminded her that homeless people "really don't have the luxuries we have."

"We have three square meals a day and we need to not take that for granted," Sierra, 15, commented.

Marie said the toughest part for her was "probably the food, not having enough."

"It was the best vegetable soup I ever had, though," she remarked.

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