

ON THE MOVE

Columbian Squires:

Young men with adult duties



Jordan Liles, 13 (clockwise from top); Chris Connelly, 13; Billy Spaulding, 10; Andrew Liles, 10; and Ken Connelly, 10; members of the Father O'Brien Squires Circle, gathered Sept. 7 at St. Mary Our Mother Church in Horseheads.

As leader of a 21-member group, Chris Connelly conducts meetings at which fundraisers, service events and social outings are planned. That's a pretty fair amount of responsibility for any adult.

What's impressive about Chris' role is that he's only 13 years old.

In fact, all members of his group are between the ages of 10 and 17. They're the Father O'Brien Squires Circle, a first-year organization at Church of St. Mary Our Mother in Horseheads, and Chris is their Chief Squire.

The Squires are the official youth organization of the international Knights of Columbus; there are more than 1,200 groups, or circles, worldwide. Members enjoy social, service and spiritual opportunities — and, by design, these events are organized by the Squires themselves.

"It's a stepping stone, to introduce them to the management of meetings and the organization of activities," said Jim Swackhamer, the Squires' adult moderator.

Though the Squires only began meeting this past spring, their list of activities is already quite diverse. They arranged a special Mass in August to honor the 75th anniversary of the Squires' founding; performed yard work for St. Mary Our Mother Parish; and walked in a procession and served as greeters at an All Souls Day Mass Nov. 2.

"I felt we were all doing something good," Chris said of the Mass.

Most recently, the Squires held a bottle drive at St. Mary Our Mother to raise money toward future Squires events. John Pichette, 15, the circle's Deputy Chief Squire, noted that the group has already discussed outings to an Elmira College hockey game and a water park, along with bowling and a picnic. The Squires are also considering a trip to Mount Saviour Monastery near Elmira "just to get kind of a different experience," said John, a sophomore at Notre Dame High School.

The Squires plan these activities by meeting on the first Wednesday of every month. Swackhamer said that he and other adults in Knights of Columbus Council 6158 offer support and guidance to the Squires. But by and large, the youths are expected to make their own decisions and be self-supporting financially.

"We basically run the show," John said. "We hold elections (of officers), and decide whether we should do certain things, like fundraisers. Funds will be put in the treasury, for activities or supplies we might need to buy."

"People from the church come and tell us what's going on. And then we decide," added Chris, an eighth-grader

at Holy Family Junior High School. "Basically, we go from the church bulletin to see if anybody needs anything, and then we go from there."

A set of officers conducts the meeting. Regardless of age or rank, every Squire has a say in the issues discussed.

"We vote on everything; it's the whole group. That wouldn't be fair if I just decided everything," Chris said. "Everyone has a different job at the meetings, so everyone's involved."

John noted that the Squires offer leadership roles for boys who may not find that option elsewhere. "In school, maybe in sports there's different

leadership positions. Here, you don't have to be great at any sport to take a leadership role," he said.

The group's membership has picked up quickly over the last few months. At least 10 members are required to begin a circle, and on Sept. 23 the circle was officially invested during a ceremony at St. Mary Our Mother Church. Most of the 21 members are St. Mary Our Mother parishioners.

The Squires currently hold their meetings in the former convent at St. Mary Our Mother, where they also enjoy the availability of a Ping-Pong table and pool table. Swackhamer said he hopes to secure a donated building or room so the Squires can have a permanent facility.

Although Squire Circles are scarce in the Diocese of Rochester, the international order has a long and successful history. There are more 22,000 Columbian Squires in the U.S., Canada, Mexico, the Philippines, the Bahamas, Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Swackhamer observed that the Squires serve as a good feeder system for the Knights of Columbus, whose minimum eligibility age is 18.

Swackhamer said that although "there's a lot of competition for the boys' time," he already sees strong dedication forming among the Squires.

"It's interesting to see how some of the kids are coming from their soccer practices to the meetings," he remarked.

John said he enjoys being actively involved with the Squires. "It's a comfortable environment to be in," he said. "You meet new people."



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