

on the **MOUNTAIN**

# City retreat spawns new friendships

"The Promise Weekend" could mark the start of a promising ministry for teens in the city of Rochester.

The first-time retreat was held Nov. 16-18 at the Urban Center, located in the former convent at Holy Apostles Church. Nearly 30 teens (ages 14-18) attended the 24-hour program, and the diversity was impressive:

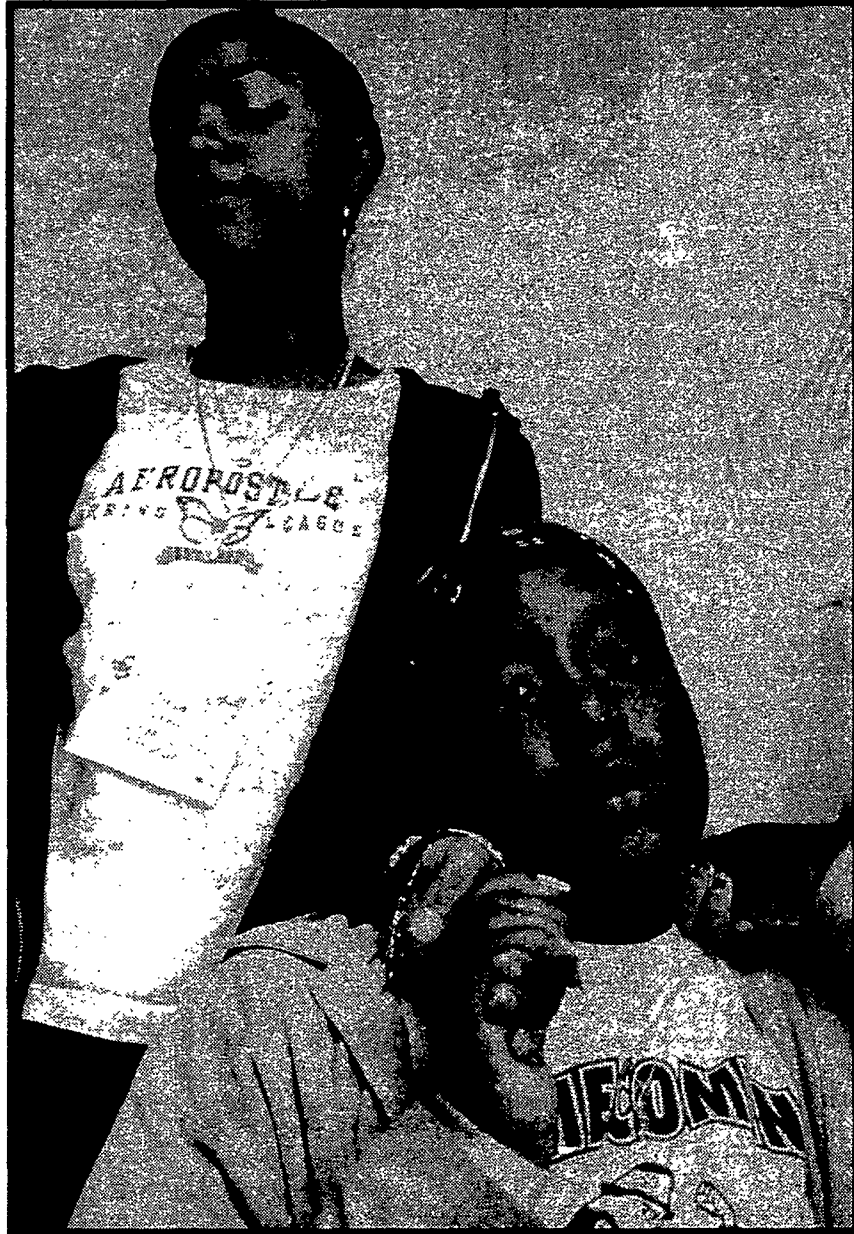
Approximately 12 churches were represented by teens and adult leaders.

Following a format similar to other teen retreats offered by the Diocese of Rochester, the gathering featured prayer sessions, witness talks by youth and adults, small-group sharing, a reconciliation session, skits and music. Holy Apostles' Sunday noon Mass, which was celebrated in Spanish and English, served as the final event.

Retreatants helped out as lectors, greeters and gift-bearers, and even as liturgical dancers from St. Bridget's and Immaculate Conception.

Lynette DeJesus, first-year diocesan coordinator of urban youth ministry, said the retreat was a good way for her and adult parish leaders to promote harmony among the parish communities.

"We wanted to do something as a group. A lot of the parishes and youth ministers didn't know each other, hadn't ever done anything like that," DeJesus said. "The goal was to get them to step out of the parish group into something bigger — to get to know kids from other parishes, to try something new." DeJesus added that she



Achola Bitek of Immaculate Conception Parish holds hands with Tatia Martinez (left) of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church as they silently reflect and pray in a circle of teens at the urban youth retreat Nov. 18.

strove to include "parishes without a youth group or that were just getting one started."

Melissa Santiago, who had never attended a retreat before, admitted that she was nervous at the beginning but grew quite comfortable. "I want to come again," said Melissa, 14, who attends Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier Church.

Of particular importance to Melissa was the small-group sharing that took place Saturday night. "We were all talking about our problems, and I realized how I take my family for granted," she said. During her Sunday-morning witness talk, Melissa told the group that she planned to amend her family situation as soon as she got home from the retreat.

DeJesus gave the retreat's final talk. After describing the challenges of deciding to move from Cleveland

(where she grew up) to Miami to Rochester in recent years, she encouraged participants to continually welcome Jesus into their lives.

"Even though you may think that nothing happened this weekend, that's not true," she told them. "Jesus was here this weekend and he changed you. You may not know how, but pay attention."

Participants seemed to bond quickly over 24 hours' time: When the retreat ended, numerous hugs were exchanged. "They hit it off right from the beginning. I was amazed, actually," DeJesus commented. "I thought they might be a little shy."

The retreat brought together not only many parishes, but also teens of diverse ethnic backgrounds — black, white and Hispanic. This never seemed to pose a problem, Katie Shanley observed.

"Not at all. It's awesome," said Katie, 15, from Holy Family Parish.

Although DeJesus said she encouraged teens to bring their friends, there were apparently many new friendships formed as well. "You meet people from all over the place. I even learned how to do Hispanic dances," said Nathalie Pierre-Philippe, 17, from Immaculate Conception. "Everyone was here for a common reason. It was definitely worth it; this kind of retreat will bring people closer together."

Alexandra Pattison, 14, from Holy Family, said she would attend another retreat for city teens if it were offered. "I met mostly new people, making new friends, and the activities were fun. I think it's a good idea; I think they should keep it up and do it more," she said.

And that's exactly what DeJesus intends.

"Now that I have some names and they have this experience, I'm hoping to build a youth committee to plan youth rallies and retreats," she said. DeJesus added that her current focus is on Catholics, but she hopes to eventually expand it to include non-Catholic city teens.



Benji Hernandez of Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier laughs as Melissa Santiago, also of Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier, falls from her chair while their group rehearses a skit at their retreat, held at the Urban Center at Holy Apostles Church in Rochester.

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