

'Souper' initiative scores in diocese

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

Will Prapestis looks forward to his family's annual Super Bowl gathering with their friends. On Jan. 26, however, he had a lingering reflection amid the hoopla of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers-Oakland Raiders game.

"I thought that it just kind of amazes me how a simple game can draw in so many people and so much money, and so many people are neglected," said Will, 15, a parishioner at Ss. Peter and Paul Parish in Elmira.

Come on, some people may say, don't be a downer. This is one of the biggest party nights of the year!

Yet Will realizes that doesn't hold true for everyone. Earlier that day, he and other young Ss. Peter and Paul parishioners had taken part in the "Souper Bowl of Caring," collecting money to benefit poor people who patronize a local soup kitchen.

Souper Bowl of Caring began in 1990 when young members of Spring Valley Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S.C., took to heart a pun by the Rev. Brad Smith, now the Souper Bowl's director. Smith's simple prayer was, "Lord, even as we enjoy the Super Bowl football game, help us be mindful of those who are without a bowl of soup to eat."

From there, the Spring Valley youths organized local efforts to feed the hungry. The Souper Bowl went national in 1993, and it's now an ecumenical effort operating in

every U.S. state as well as Canada. Held each year on Super Bowl weekend, it had collected \$16.6 million prior to this year's Super Bowl — including \$3.1 million in 2002 — according to organizers.

The Souper Bowl has grown steadily in the Rochester Diocese over the past 10 years. Michael Theisen, diocesan director of youth ministry, said that "a number of parishes" representing all regions of the diocese take part.

"What always intrigued me about it was that it was started by a youth group. If nothing else, I would use it as an illustration of what young people can do to make a difference in the world. It started locally and just grew — the power of a good idea," Theisen said.

Souper Bowl involves parish youth groups raising money, and in some cases donated food, on Super Bowl weekend. They station themselves at church doorways after weekend Masses and employ soup kettles to collect donations.

One nice aspect of this fundraiser is that no money goes to Souper Bowl officials; all they ask is for parishes to report the final amount to add to the national total. Each parish can then put all the money toward the local charity of its choice. For Our Lady of Lourdes in Elmira, this year's total of \$510 collected is being split evenly to benefit patrons of the Elmira Community Free Soup Kitchen and the Food Bank of the Southern Tier.

"Let alone food for the Super Bowl, they don't have food for the rest of the year," pointed out Maggie Johnson, Our Lady of Lourdes' faith-formation director.

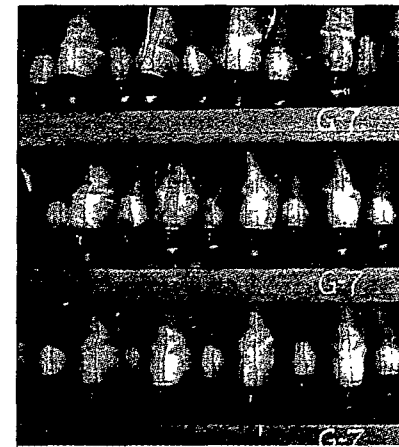
Johnson asks for at least \$1 from each person, and encourages parents to hand dollar bills to their children to drop in the kettles. Johnson said she likes the fact that the money stays in the community — as opposed to some charities where, she remarked, "We never get to help



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

A skating celebration

Students in all grades at Spencerport's St. John the Evangelist School took part in a roller-skating event Jan. 31, which was held as part of Catholic Schools Week celebrations. Above, fifth-grader Mariah DeBellis (left) holds her arms out to third-grader Erin McLane as she roller skates in the gymnasium. At right are the rows of roller skates that the children used during the event.



our neighbors."

Ss. Peter and Paul drew \$1,378.33 this year for the Community Free Soup Kitchen. Will, who staffed the 8:30 a.m. Mass, reported that parishioners responded willingly. "People were very pleased to see kids around my age pitching in to help out. The general reaction I get is pretty friendly," he said. Cecilia Ryan, the parish's youth minister, said that youths traditionally don football uniforms while collecting. This year Ryan managed to borrow a Tampa Bay jersey from her nephew — a rare find in Buffalo Bills land, but quite timely as the Bucs went on to score a 48-21 victory over Oakland.

"That worked out real well. We

were really lucky on that one," Ryan said.

Ryan said she typically asks for people to donate \$1, or perhaps an amount that matches the cost of a favorite Super Bowl snack. "A large bag of potato chips is \$3.99," Ryan said. "A lot of people spend a lot of money on those parties. If I could spend this much for a good time, how much could I spend for somebody to eat?"

At St. Dominic's in Shortsville, Souper Bowl raised \$470.65 from the Jan. 25-26 Masses to go to a local food cupboard. Andrea Record, youth minister, said that in preparing for the Souper Bowl, she told parish youths to consider the wide gap between Super Bowl spending and folks who are penniless.

"Millions of dollars are spent to hype up the Super Bowl when there are people hungry in this country. You hear how much advertisers spend, they rattle off some million-dollar figure," Record said.

Record remarked that people should still enjoy the football game, saying the Souper Bowl is "not to boycott the Super Bowl. It's just to put it in perspective and draw awareness to what gets overlooked during all the hype."

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