

Tier ministry targets teens in need

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

PAINTED POST — At times, fortune and misfortune are sharply divided in Corning. On the one hand, the Southern Tier city is home to Corning Inc., the glass industry that has provided employment and security for many families.

But not all families. According to Marie McCaig, youth minister at All Saints Parish, there isn't much middle ground between the "haves" and the "have-nots." The difference, she said, shows up in the schools, where youths who can't afford to maintain fashion trends may be subject to judgment and ridicule.

"It's sad, isn't it? It's the kids who have no control over their situation at home," McCaig said.

One person who can relate to this issue is Michael Reynolds, 16, an All Saints youth-group member who is a sophomore at Corning East High School. Michael said his parents provide for his basic needs, but his father, a manufacturing employee, is the only working family member. His income leaves little spending money to spare, so the family often shops at outlet stores. As a result, if Michael wishes for some trendy shoes, he said his parents might point out that discount shoes are much less expensive.

Though Michael may not qualify as desperately poor, he still wasn't expecting much for Christmas this past year. However, he was served a pleasant curve ball by his youth minister.

On Christmas morning, a bevy of gifts awaited him: shirts, a scarf, gloves and a portable compact-disc player — all courtesy of the Teen Angel program operated by McCaig.

"She really surprised me," Michael said.

Michael is one of many youths to benefit from Teen Angel. By keeping contact with officials in the Corning City School District, McCaig is able to track teens who may be in need of certain items based on teachers' observations. If the students' parents are willing to accept gifts, McCaig arranges to have them forwarded — often within 24 hours.

"We're constantly aware of kids who don't have winter coats," said McCaig, who noted that needs also become apparent when teachers see students wearing the same outfits several days in a row. She and Grace Rossettie, a program volunteer, cited several other situations involving teen recipients: A girl who needed to pass gym in order to graduate from high school but couldn't afford a bathing suit for swimming class; a girl who needed clothing for a job in-



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier
Marie McCaig, youth minister at All Saints Parish in Corning/Painted Post, gives 16-year-old Mike Reynolds a jacket and a new pair of shoes Feb. 5 at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Painted Post. McCaig coordinates a program called Teen Angel, which provides items to teens in need.



terview; students who needed pocket calculators; high-schoolers who couldn't afford yearbooks.

Based on her knowledge of such situations, McCaig began the Teen Angel program four years ago. Also fueling her motivation was the realization that charitable agencies often provide Christmas gifts for children ages 12 and under, leaving the teens out of the mix.

McCaig said that when the Teen Angel idea was brought to school officials, "I think they recognized the need but didn't think we'd ever be able to respond." Yet through persistent fundraising, she said, "Within months we had \$5,000."

Teen Angel was originally a Christmas-only venture. Because of widespread support, it now operates all year long, as evidenced by the many piles and racks of clothing in one corner of the basement hall at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church. Much of the financial support has come from All Saints parishioners, as well as their family and friends. (The parish includes the faith communities of St. Mary and St. Vincent de Paul in Corning and Immaculate Heart of Mary in Painted Post, a village adjacent to the city.) Supporters are asked to make an annual pledge of \$50; many also donate new and slightly used clothing.

Teen Angel also gets assistance from local businesses, including Corning Inc. McCaig added that several area clothing-store managers alert her to upcoming clearance

sales. Pointing to a pile of T-shirts, she said their list price was \$22 but she bought them for \$1.97 each. Near the shirts were a bunch of coats listing for \$98 that were offered to her for \$23 each — "so I got 15 of them," she said.

Rossettie, one of many adult parishioners actively involved in the Teen Angel program, gives the lion's share of credit to McCaig's persuasive ways with potential supporters. "When Marie says something, they can't say no," Rossettie remarked.

The program remains busiest during the Christmas season. In fact, 80 All Saints youth-group members recently sponsored Teen Angel recipients, stuffing stockings with gifts they had purchased. "We felt that

getting and giving presents (for ourselves) was nice, but it didn't matter as much as helping the people who really needed it," said John Searson, 18, a senior at Corning West High School.

John and his family sponsored two girls, so he went with his mother, Mary Jo, to shop for clothing and beauty products. "I don't know much about those things, but I know what smells good and what doesn't," he quipped.

Identities of Teen Angel recipients are kept anonymous by request, creating one of the most interesting aspects of the program: People involved in both the giving and receiving of the same items can walk the school hallways together without realizing their connection.

And rightly or wrongly, McCaig said, fashion choices do matter in those hallways — so the Teen Angel program attempts to provide name-brand clothing from stores such as American Eagle, The Gap and Old Navy, so that teens such as Michael stand a better chance of fitting in.

Michael said his close friends don't judge him by the clothes he wears, but he is conscious of the image he portrays at school. "I shop at Wal-Mart. I don't tell them, but I hear in the halls that Wal-Mart isn't a good store," he said. "Corning is supposed to be a rich town. Most of the kids I know, their parents work at Corning."

Still, Michael has decided to discuss his financial realities in a newspaper story if it helps raise public awareness.

"I don't care that people know," he said, adding that perhaps "since there's so many kids like this, they'll see the need and donate to charities."



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