

Youths ponder war, life in Iraq

Jennifer Burke/Contributing writer

RUSHVILLE — Fog, rain and warm beds gave way to cardboard boxes and thoughts of sand and wind for a group of high-school students on the night of March 21.

The students belong to the Our Lady of the Lakes Youth Group, and youths from the parishes of St. Michael in Penn Yan, St. Theresa in Stanley and St. Mary in Rushville participated. Following a youth penance service at St. Mary March 21, 14 teenagers and two young adults went next door to the parish hall and began setting up their sleeping bags inside large cardboard boxes.

Although they didn't know exactly why they'd be spending the night in boxes, the teens seemed excited as they prepared their makeshift homes, using duct tape to create multiple-box structures and scissors to poke holes in the boxes for skylights. Youth minister Martha DeBoover had more in store for them than just a night of fun and games, however.

"Do you know why we brought boxes tonight?" she asked once the teens had settled down. "You guys aren't Americans anymore tonight. You're Iraqi people."

DeBoover and fellow youth minister Lori Jones planned the overnight with the theme of war in mind. They thought that by sleeping in boxes away from the comforts of home, the young people would be able to get a better sense of what the Iraqi people are dealing with. They also recognized the importance of educating the youths about the Catholic view of war, and although Jones wasn't able to attend the overnight because of an emergency, DeBoover had a full schedule for the teens.

"We're going to talk about patriotism versus Catholic views and if Jesus was patriotic. We plan on taking their opinions, and then letting them know what our Catholic beliefs should be, through the Gospel," DeBoover said.

DeBoover explained to the teens the church's just-war theory, and they learned that the church stands



Rebecca Gosselin/Catholic Courier

Members of Our Lady of the Lakes Youth Group learned March 21 what it is like to be an Iraqi refugee during an overnight event at Rushville's St. Mary Church. Above, Theresa DeBoover (left) and Elizabeth Way try out the box structures they created and in which they slept for the night.



behind war only if it is a last resort, if there is a reasonable hope of success and if fewer people would be hurt in a war than in another situation.

"I never realized that there was a just cause for war," said Brian Hall, 15, of St. Michael Parish.

DeBoover then read sample scenarios and had the teens decide whether a war would be justified. This prompted discussion since the decisions were not always easy, and the teens expressed a variety of different views.

"Before I thought it was good that (coalition forces) were trying to get rid of Saddam, but bad that they were killing people. It (the discussion) has made me think that there's a lot of people dying that maybe wouldn't be if there was another way," said Kara Schroeder, 14, of St. Michael Parish.

"I would say that I'm pro-war. I think that with what Saddam has done and what the objective of the United States is, more good than bad will come of it," said Geoff Ostrander, 17, of St. Mary Parish.

The conversation soon turned to patriotism, and DeBoover introduced a new way of thinking about it.

"President Bush is patriotic of the United States, but Jesus is patriotic of all creation, all people," DeBoover said. "They're all our people.



Kristen Barnoski puts the finishing touches on her structure.

They're all part of Jesus' patriotic family."

DeBoover stressed the importance of taking a moment to think about what Jesus would do in this situation, and most agreed that prayer was the one powerful tool that could be used to work for peace.

"We are a family tonight. We need to pray, because that's what we can do," DeBoover said.

After the discussion ended, the

teens had more time to make their box houses before prayer time. Some decorated the inside of their boxes, while other played card games, the way Iraqi refugees might play games to give some sense of normalcy to their children.

"It's really weird, because if you had to do this every day of your life, it would be a little scary," said Dan McGuffie, 15, of St. Michael Parish.

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