

Cultural change stirs Cornell group

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

Father Mike Mahler, for one, thinks college students can derive great satisfaction from heading south in the spring.

Except he doesn't mean lolling on the beaches of Fort Lauderdale or Cancun. Try fixing up decrepit homes in rural Kentucky.

"It gives them an opportunity to grease their elbows for a week in manual labor, which is a welcome relief from the life of the mind. And I can get away from the desk and from ministry, use my chainsaw and swing my pick ax, and not think about anything at all," explained Father Mahler, who has spent a quarter-century as organizer and leader of an annual service project for two colleges where he's served.

A freeing of the mind can also mean a freeing of the soul, based on students' contact with indigent residents. That's what Josh Pack and Lori Lepak discovered on Cornell Catholic Community's trip this past May 17-24 to McKee, deep in the eastern Kentucky region of Appalachia.

"It was really about alleviating loneliness and sort of sharing compassion," said Pack, 26.

Lepak, 27, has some good examples to support that comment. "One day we went to the house of an old bachelor farmer who didn't even have running water. He had said he wanted us to do some weed whacking, but we also sat down and watched a John Wayne video with him. He just wanted company," she said.

She also reflected on a recently widowed elderly woman's foster niece who has been caring for the family for years. "And that left no



Photo courtesy of Rohit Fernandes

Lori Lepak (left) and Rohit Fernandes (right) complete work for George Carpenter at his home in rural Kentucky.

time for herself. Because of her decency, she's not going to have a family herself," Lepak said.

After a pause, she added, "That really saddened me. I pray for that woman."

Pack and Lepak were first-timers to McKee as part of a 16-member Cornell University contingent, which included Father Mahler as well as another chaplain, Sister Donna Fannon of the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart order. The group combined work and visitation with a heavy dose of spirituality, gathering daily for Mass, prayer and reflection.

Cornell annually does its service work in McKee, which is where St. Paul Parish — a sister parish of Cornell Catholic Community — is located. Participants raise funds in advance to cover their expenses for supplies and travel, and donate leftover funds to St. Paul's.

Father Mahler said his groups have mainly assisted elderly people who have lived in the McKee area their whole lives; rarely travel even moderate distances; and are largely uneducated. "They're completely clueless as to where Cornell is, and what a college student is. You might as well say you're on the other side

of Mars," Father Mahler remarked.

Yet residents are very grateful for the labor, and perhaps even more so for the company. "Occasionally the work is just an excuse to visit someone who's isolated and lonely," Father Mahler said.

Lepak said she enjoyed her surroundings, remarking, "Life is a much more unhurried, relaxed pace. Here (at Cornell) you have to multi-task. There, people would offer a can of soda and we'd sit around and talk for about an hour. There was much more of a focus on human contact."

Pack has been active in social-justice causes and also has extended family that lives in Kentucky, so he wasn't caught off guard by the poverty he witnessed. Yet that wasn't true for all the students on the May excursion, he observed.

"Some of them come from very affluent lifestyles. One person was ecstatic to see a cow; she had never seen one," observed Pack, a native of New London, Ohio. "I think they wanted to get out of their comfort zones and do something nice."

"Part of it is to enhance their exposure to human experience as part of their education," Father Mahler agreed. "College students are thirst-

Young Adult

ing for new experiences."

Father Mahler began the spring trips to McKee in 1977 while serving as a chaplain at SUNY College at Geneseo, establishing a tradition of elaborate service projects that continued at the college even after he left in 1983 for Cornell. He kept the Kentucky connection going at the Ivy League institute, where he began as chaplain and became director of campus ministry in 1992.

Since 1978 Father Mahler has traveled every year with the student groups except for 1983, when he was on sabbatical. But even a single trip to McKee can leave a profound impact, he said.

"They make lifelong friends with the students they serve with. Year in and year out, students will say 'That was my best week at Cornell ... my most important experience of my life thus far.' It bears itself out in terms of what happens to their lives; you'll see students changing their majors and getting into something leaning toward human service," said Father Mahler, noting that the Appalachia project has been "directly connected" to some past Cornell students making long-term volunteer commitments abroad.

Lepak, who is working toward her doctorate in chemistry, said she plans to carry the Kentucky experience forward by making volunteer time while also building her career. "I try to lead a more balanced life now," said Lepak, a native of Auburn and St. Peter and Paul Ukrainian Catholic Parish.

Pack, who was raised a Methodist but is discerning about becoming a Catholic, said the May trip helped draw him even closer to the faith. A graduate student in biological and environmental engineering, Pack has also become more inclined to strive toward "developing new applications to process environmentally safe products and apply them to people who are needy," he said. "So much (of my field) is helping an affluent company and society continue in their affluence."

In late June Father Mahler ended his 20-year stay at Cornell to become pastor of nearby St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Ithaca. Yet he hopes to keep the service trip going, perhaps by combining Cornell students and St. Catherine parishioners. As for Lepak, she hopes the tradition will carry on for many years to come.

"This is a great program and it really deserves to continue," she stated.

Events

THU, JULY 24 — *Theology on Tap: If the Pope Played Jeopardy, Would He Always Be Right?* Fr. Brian Coal, speaker. *Billy's Good Times*, 125 10th Ave. Rd., Henrietta. A 10:00 a.m. Mass, 7:30 p.m. discussion. 585-428-3228 ext. 1375.

FRI, JULY 25 — *Music & More* at St. Thomas More Church, 205 East Ave., Rochester, picnic 2 p.m., Mass 5 p.m. Bishop Matthew H. Clark, celebrant. \$10 tickets at all Theology on Tap events or call Shannon Loughlin at 585-428-3228 ext. 1218 or 585-388-7177 ext. 1218.