

Bellevue Leader

February 20, 2008

Helping the homeless at home

Youth group takes 'Urban Plunge' to serve needy

BY ZACHARY McDONALD
LEADER STAFF WRITER

The youth group at St. James United Methodist Church spent the weekend getting well acquainted with the homeless population of Omaha.

They did so through a program called "Urban Plunge," which is sponsored by Christ For The City International. From Friday night to Sunday afternoon, seven children and three leaders visited seven missions organizations, helping out at each stop and, as CFTCI development manager Sara Harris likes to say, spending a lot of time outside their "comfort zones."

"You're uncomfortable a lot of the weekend," Harris said. "At the end, because you've gone through this, it becomes very comfortable to serve."

And that seems like it has come true for the group from St. James. As they talk about their weekend in the city, they seem ready and willing to go back as soon as they can.

"It was interesting to spend the weekend seeing the poverty and less fortunate here at home in our community that we drive by on the way to the airport and don't see it," said Drew Christensen, 17.

Everyone has their own personal highlight from the weekend. For instance, while working with Angels on Wheels, a program that serves meals to homeless people at night, Christensen helped anoint a



Photo submitted by Sara Harris

Drew Christensen and Anna Carnes pause for a moment as they prepare bags of groceries for Empty Tomb, a church that attracts roughly 150 homeless and low-income people from around Omaha every week, giving one free bag of groceries to each attendee after the service. The church was one of seven missions organizations the group visited.

homeless man, who had turned his life around, with oil.

"It was just cool to see a homeless person that had all this drug and alcohol addiction and somehow, like, snap your fingers and he just has that mentality toward life," he said.

Michelle Steele, 17, said going to the Douglas County Youth Center, where the group was locked in a jail cell, made the biggest impact. There, they met Pastor Ron, the DCYC chaplain, and he told them his own story.

"He had some crime in his background, but he overcame that," Steele said. "He said, 'You gotta keep it real,' and ... it was good for me. Just seeing a jail and how it works was really good."

But it wasn't just the youth who felt the impact of the weekend. At Missions For All Nations, which everyone agrees was one of the best stops of the weekend, volunteer leader Elisabeth Brown saw the team click as they put together bags of groceries for customers.

"We really had our mojo going," she said. "We had different people putting stuff in the bags and kind of passing it and the group really worked very well together as a team."

Abbey Jackson has been the youth director at St. James for the past six years. The seniors who joined her on the trip were seventh-graders when she started.

"We were laughing this weekend because we're like a

big family," she said. "We argue and we function like a big family."

Mission work at St. James is the norm. Once a month, they bring meals to the homeless at the Siena/Francis House in Omaha and every year finds them serving in a different part of the country. This summer, they will go to Austin, Texas, and they're hoping to join CFTCI on a trip to South America or Mexico within the next few years.

But Jared Brown, 15, said they don't need to travel so far to do mission work.

"We do that every day," he said. "Sure, we go to school and are kids, but we still have that mentality of Christian youth and we still — I think we serve every day."