

Teens experience life-changing mission trip close to home

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Church mission trips can be life-altering experiences for Iowa youngsters and the adults who accompany them.

Leaving home for a foreign environment - usually one with a lower standard of living - can cause teenagers to re-evaluate their priorities.

But as six young women from Pleasantville Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, learned this last spring: **You don't have to go to El Salvador or even out of state to gain new understanding about poverty and the less fortunate.**

For a real jolt of culture shock, this youth group took a mission trip to North Omaha, visiting homeless shelters, after-school programs for inner-city kids and church services where more members of the congregation collect vouchers for sacks of groceries than put something in the collection plate.

"These girls were exposed to a life that most Iowa teens may never experience," said Marcy Pettyjohn of Indianola, the youth leader and church member who arranged for the trip. "You don't have to go to a Third World country to experience poverty. The girls were amazed that they found it about two and a half hours from home."

Tara Aldrich of Pleasantville, 18, said she and the other girls weren't fearful.

"But we were definitely hesitant," Aldrich said. **"It pulled us outside our comfort zone and put us into a situation we were definitely unfamiliar with."**

The program, Omaha Urban Plunge, is the brainchild of Michael Ross of Omaha, development direction at Christ for the City International, which aims to help people "transform cities by transforming lives."

The inner-city project is just one of the ministry's programs. A majority of the organization's work is in Latin America, where 75 percent of its 130 affiliated missionaries are Latino.

"Throughout the weekend, we challenge youngsters to find out where God is working and join him there," Ross said. "Our devotions were not about the poor, but rather about discovering what your purpose is, what your passions are, what your gifts are (so you can) come alongside a ministry."

Participants are encouraged to think about how they could duplicate the good works they saw in the Omaha inner city during the weekend crash course in meeting and interacting with people unlike them.

"It was all foreign to them," Pettyjohn said. "These were naive, small-town Iowa girls who traveled to neighborhoods where the number one cause of death for youth is gang violence."

The girls paid \$75 each to go on the trip. They assembled bags of toiletries to hand out at one of the churches they visited.

But their most important preparation, Pettyjohn said, was ear-

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From left, Tara Aldrich, Hanna Bjerke, Michaela Hinds, Morgan Anderson, Chelsea Manuel and Kelsey Knight prepare to hand out groceries at Empty Tomb Mission Church in Omaha. People who attend a Sunday service at the church receive a bag of groceries.



nest prayer asking God to "open the eyes of our hearts, that we may see everyone we meet through God's eyes."

For Aldrich, going roller skating with inner-city kids was a high point of the trip.

"It was an awesome experience," she said. **"We found out they weren't that different from us.** They were just kids, hanging out and having fun."

Even though they tried hard not to stereotype people, the girls were not fully prepared for everything they saw.

Girls with a passion for trends helped distribute clothing to people who were thankful for something clean to wear. They learned that a homeless person was just as likely to be a grandmother as an alcoholic man.

They met warm, gracious Hispanic families at All Nations Mission. They worshipped at Salem Baptist Church, an affluent black congregation.

"It was my ultimate favorite place," Aldrich said. "We were the only white people there, and we felt a little out of place. But after about 10 minutes, we felt perfectly at home. The worship service was amazing. We could feel the Holy Spirit was moving in that congregation."

Each night, the girls spent a half hour writing in a journal about what they saw and did - how it affected them, how it challenged what they thought they knew.

"As we were leaving Open Door ministries, where the girls served lunch, a man who had been pacing outside ran after us, ranting," Pettyjohn said. "The girls were about 10 yards ahead of me, and he began yelling that the shelter treated people like prisoners. It took the girls off guard."

Pettyjohn and her husband hustled the girls into the van.

"I told them that God didn't call us here to let anything bad happen to us. It was just another way to recognize that God was with us," Pettyjohn said.

And even though or perhaps because they walked into a community that made them feel uncomfortable and challenged their faith, they describe the experience as "life changing." They'd like to return and take others with them, both Pettyjohn and Aldrich said.

"I recommend it, and I'm ready to go back, in a heartbeat,"