

St. Clare's 'Reach Out Nite' Encourages Teens to Help Homeless

TOM ANDREWS
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“We get to work with our hands and it's our faith in action. What did Mother Theresa say? ‘God doesn't have hands. He uses mine.’”

— Maureen LeGros, Youth Minister
St. Clare Catholic Church, Wind Lake

Several years ago, Maureen LeGros and others at St. Clare Catholic Church in Wind Lake were looking for some sort of spark. An activity of some kind that would get the younger people in the parish to become more enthused about coming to church beyond attending Sunday Mass.

“The church before I got here tried to get the youth involved in dances and other activities but nobody was showing up,” LeGros explained. “I suggested that we do some sort of outreach and maybe we'll get people to come and that's what happened.”

Thus, a bi-annual event called “Reach Out Nite” was born. Once each October and again in winter, St. Clare offers this opportunity for participants to experience something more than just an enjoyable social activity. It's an opportunity to be part of a genuine human response to the problem of homelessness.

The event started in the fall of 2015 and attendance has expanded beyond the youth ministry to include people of all ages. Activity stations are set up in the downstairs Holy Family hall at the church where participants cook food, decorate cookies, fill trail mix bags, and even make socks and blankets. The following day, they take these items to the Repairers of the Breach, a daytime homeless shelter at 1335 W. Vliet St. in Milwaukee, where



▲ St. Clare Catholic Church in Wind Lake holds “Reach Out Nite” twice a year. (Photo by Tom Andrews)

at-risk men and women create community and a sense of ownership in their center.

“I had a connection with Repairers of the Breach,” said LeGros. “We have people that are in need right here (in the Milwaukee area) and we have day mission trips, which is really awesome because these kids get to experience what I would call the Ground Zero of homelessness. We go to the only daytime homeless shelter in the city of Milwaukee and not only do the kids serve but they dine with the guests and they have an opportunity to work in their clothing distribution center.”

Established in 1991, Repairers of the Breach is the area's only daytime refuge and resource center for homeless adults. Rather than focusing on where the homeless sleep at night, the center works to address the root causes of homelessness through programs designed to move marginalized people into more productive and meaningful lives. The center is open from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday and on several major holidays when many other programs serving the poor and homeless are closed. Between 70 and 150 homeless

adults are served every day and as many as 2,500-3,000 people every year.

The Reach Out Nite event also delivers a lesson in harsh reality: homelessness isn't a problem restricted to some far off land. It has a very human face and it's close by.

“The kids learn that homelessness isn't in South America,” said LeGros.

“Homelessness is right here.

Homelessness is a 25-minute drive.

They get to see that these people have hearts like we have hearts and the only thing that separates us from them is a few miles. These are young people who are going to be voting in a few years and who are going to make a difference in our community. I want them to see that there's a bigger world out there and we want them to be touched by this.

“The students that show up and go to Repairers of the Breach see a different kind of poverty and they also realize that there is a spiritual poverty,” added LeGros. “A lot of these people that we go to see are very prayerful, very much into their faith and there's something to be learned from that as well.

Erika Zubarik has been a parishioner at St. Clare her entire life. Today at age 20, she is a student at UW – Whitewater with hopes of someday becoming a doctor. She has a keen sense that there is “something bigger than me to do and I've always had the urge to help people.

“St. Clare has always provided good opportunities to volunteer,” added Zubarik. “It's really helped me to get closer to God because even the people who have nothing in this world and are still connected to God, kind of open your eyes (to the fact that) materialism isn't really what life is all about. Homelessness is extremely close and you don't realize how many homeless people are out there until you're actually out there feeding them.”

“I think it's a really great way to give back to the community and it's a way to get children involved in service work,” said Jennifer Kent, who's been a St. Clare parishioner for 11 years. “The kids are really excited because they're actually doing something, not just standing around. They're making blankets and preparing food. I feel like we always want to do something for people who need our help and this is different than just sending money to somewhere.”

At a recent Reach Out Nite in January, more than 75 people, young and old, began with a prayer in the church lobby, holding hands in a large circle, before they collectively rolled up their sleeves and once again made the event a big success.

“We're kind of stealth, too,” smiled LeGros. “I don't think a lot of parishioners realize that if they were to come here on a Friday night and see what's going on, they would be really proud of our youth.”

For more information about Repairers of the Breach, visit www.repairers.org.