Students, residents and CAP benefit from WorkFest

Every spring when Interstate 75 is teeming with college students driving south for fun, in the sun, it also carries students with a different aim. Approximately 460 students and 60 short-term volunteers will be traveling to Appalachia for CAP’s WorkFest.

“WorkFest has always been seen as a hands-on experience for college students,” says Volunteer Admissions Coordinator Kathy Kluesner. This year, WorkFest will run for three weeks each in two locations. The volunteers will complete home repair projects, such as roofing or siding, building a porch or replacing windows.

Kiara West, who coordinates WorkFest, says it is a first-time service experience for many. She has observed that the students are often arrive as excited, self-confident young people who are focused on their expectations for the week. As they build community with others from around the country, learn new skills and meet people from the region, their focus becomes more outward. “The sense of doing something bigger than themselves really becomes apparent,” Kiara says. “They’re always so humbled by the fact that people in Appalachia welcome them into their homes and make them feel like family.”

While families who live in the homes they repair benefit from improved living conditions, CAP’s volunteer program also benefits. Many potential volunteers fall in love with the experience. Some return later as long-term volunteers.

So as young people frolic in the sun way to enjoy a week off school. Kathy says: “Although they sacrifice time and money and the possibility of spending spring break in a more glamorous place, they receive far more than they expected.”

Sisters demonstrate love for those who have less

In the Thompson home, the command to “love one another” was put into action. The North Dakota family would do anything for anybody, says Anita Brooks Westrup. “That’s how we were all raised. We never had much but we were always looking for someone who had less who we could help.”

That idea has stayed with sisters, Gina Harlestad, Edith Johnson and Ethel Brooks, throughout their lives. Gina is 85; Edith and Ethel are 82-year-old twins who live in McVille, North Dakota. For more than 11 years, the women have gathered to quilt and knit items to send to the people CAP serves. These days Gina is no longer able to take part, but Ethel anticipates that she and Edith will pick up their work again this spring. “If there’s anything else we can do, we’ll do it,” she says.

No one remembers exactly how the sisters first became acquainted with CAP although it seems to have been the result of a mailing that Ethel received. She also learned about the Appalachian region through a television program that showed a boy and his mother living in a cave.

Ethel and Edith have never lived in a cave, but they do understand hard times. “We grew up in the dirty thirties when life was tough,” Ethel says.

Although adolescents are still maturing and can be difficult to work with, Jim says, “When we work with them and give them a goal, they work hard. They love it.”

What they’re working hard on are prayer and performance programs that share God’s love with other young people. At Camp A.J., the group begins the day by leading morning worship. They then participate in camp activities planning team spend time at CAP’s Camp Andrew Jackson (A.J.) deciding what sort of programs to present that summer. In July, the planners return with approximately 30 more youth to serve in the county for a week.

In the spring and summer, they have opportunities to step even farther from home as they share their gifts. The church takes their “E-team,” short for evangelization, to Appalachia to serve people who live in very different circumstances than their own.

Jim, children’s minister for the church, says the group has been traveling to Appalachia for the past four years. Their first trip is in April, when a group of 20 or so who serve on a planning team spend time at CAP’s Camp Andrew Jackson (A.J.) deciding what sort of programs to present that summer. In July, the planners return with approximately 30 more youth to serve in the county for a week.

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The Children Lead

Young volunteers enliven camp and community

The children are vital to Fairhaven Church in Centerville, Ohio. Fourth- and fifth-grade students who participate in the church’s Escape ministry spend three hours every Saturday preparing a program for Sunday morning. They also take their show on the road once a month to share their faith and talents in the community.

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newcomers combine motivations and outlooks

That’s how we were all raised. We never had much but we were always looking for someone who had less so we could help,” said Edith. “They both (Ethel and Ethel) would do anything for anybody.”

The twins are known throughout McVille for their talent as quilters, but they both dismiss the idea that what they create is beautiful. “Our fingers aren’t as nimble as they used to be so they (the quilts) might not be as perfect as we would like,” Edith said. Ethel points out that what they make is for someone who had less who we could help.”

I felt a calling in my heart that was pretty significant,” says Shannon Allford about her decision to volunteer with CAP. She first became familiar with the organization as a chapereone for a group that participated in WorkFest. “At WorkFest I just fell in love with the CAP organization, who they help and how they do it.”

Christian Appalachian Project welcomed seven new volunteers at its January long-term volunteer orientation. These volunteers will spend the next several months serving the people of Appalachia through repairing homes, teaching preschool, caring for people with disabilities and empowering domestic abuse survivors.

“I finally went to work to do what I love,” said Jim Bloemker. “I called Appalachian Mission of America my home. To be a part of this agency is to be a part of God’s great mission to provide hope to all.”

Volunteering offers spiritual gifts

By Paul Rodriguez
Long-term CAP volunteer in Child and Family Development

I found myself on my knees one day not knowing what awaited me. How could I know that through CAP I would experience transformation, love, hugs, not to mention exhaustion. Spending every waking day in these mountains is like a child daring to leap into a pond of cold water. The child’s innocence spurs the craving, allows him to be himself. Nothing can hurt him.

Diving into service with CAP has introduced me to new faces of Christ that infect me with laughter, silliness and goofiness.

For Jenna Boyd, it seemed like volunteer opportunities opened at CAP, it seemed like not only the right people, but also the right place. “I was looking to give of myself in the right time, but also the right place. I found my calling at CAP.”

Edith and Ethel demonstrate their thanks by continuing to share what they have with the people CAP serves.

Long-term volunteers

Newcomers combine motivations and outlooks

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Beth Gehret didn’t know anything about CAP until she attended a volunteer fair. She had been searching for a long-term volunteer opportunity but could only locate organizations looking for volunteers to help clean up their community. Since she found CAP Gehret discovered her grandmother and her best friend both knew about the organization, then everything began to fall into place. Her decision to volunteer is strongly tied in with her faith. Gehret says, “I’ve always associated being a Christian with giving back. It’s a great way to show gratitude for what we’ve been given.”

Kerris McCarty also says he believes volunteering, like any work a person does, can be an extension of his faith. “I felt led by God to be doing this, this year,” he says. He was attracted to the idea of exploiting different ways of life and living in community. Since he discovered another benefit to volunteering “There’s something freeing in doing it for no money.”

Jim Bloemker. She read about the need for summer volunteers in a magazine; the description of the area called to her. She served for two summers at Camp Shawnee before returning full-time. “The Lord has given me such a passion for the people of Eastern Kentucky,” she says. “I find joy in working with these individuals every day. I find that it is only right to give this joy right back to the Lord through service.”

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