

Wendi C. Thomas: Never underrate teens on mission

By Wendi C. Thomas

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These are regular kids -- laughing and teasing each other, hoping out loud the newspaper interview keeps them out of class for a while.

One of the boys has a crush the size of Texas on one of the girls -- these are high school students, after all.

But these six students at Memphis Catholic High are extraordinary volunteers, and not just of their own time.

They encourage their classmates to do the same -- so much so that this team won the regional competition for the Jefferson Awards Youth Service Initiative, a program in select high schools designed to train the next generation of volunteers.

Memphis is one of eight cities nationally where the initiative is in action and has 16 schools in the program, including Catholic Diocese schools, Memphis City Schools and a Shelby County School.

In June, Memphis Catholic's team will go to Washington to compete for the national award.

The team's sponsor and the school's development director, Dani Ray Barton, is very proud of her team, composed of juniors Maria Perez, 16, Chelsea Leufroy, 16, Ebone Webb, 17, Bre'anna Jolliff, 17, Phillip Pearce, 17, and Keithern Blair, 17.

Each student at Memphis Catholic is required to volunteer 20 hours annually, but this year -- thanks to the prodding of this team -- each student averaged 40 hours of volunteer work, doubling their goal.

They've grasped what it often takes adults years to learn: To whom much is given, much is required.

"When I was little, I needed a lot of help from other people," said Maria, who immigrated to the United States from Mexico.

Chelsea, whose family left New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, agreed. "Since a lot of people helped me and my family get on our feet, I want to help."

How do these students fit school, their mandatory work-study jobs and dozens of hours of volunteer work into a 24-hour day?

Well, for starters, they don't make excuses.

"There's plenty of time," said Phillip, who delivers Meals on Wheels and volunteers at Manna House, a homeless ministry. He and one of his brothers were adopted from an orphanage in India. His parents died of AIDS, and another brother, who is HIV-positive, remains in India.

The experience of his birth family led Phillip to come up with a service project for the following school year in partnership with Chelsea.

Each month, the team will spotlight a disease or disorder -- HIV and AIDS, Down syndrome, scleredema are just a few -- and raise money for charities that help the affected.

"Everybody knows someone who has something," Phillip reasoned.

These efforts, including the decision to spend class retreat days on service projects instead of playing paintball, are the sole initiative of the students.

"It's not the hand-holding projects that you'd think it'd be with teenagers," Barton said.

Based on the estimate that an hour of a volunteer's work is worth about \$20, the volunteer hours Memphis Catholic's high school students donated this school year totals \$133,000.

At a small school where 40 percent of the 160 students qualify for financial aid, Memphis Catholic raised \$600 in a Hope for Haiti drive. For a \$2 donation, the students didn't have to wear their uniforms and instead dressed in red, blue and white, the colors of the Haitian national flag.

"Adults tend to underestimate what children can do," said Mimi Uhlmann, the director of corporate recruiting.

Adults do underestimate teenagers, perhaps because adults don't always set the best examples for their children and those around them.

Thankfully, these six selfless young leaders at Memphis Catholic are proving true what was prophesied in the Old Testament, although teenagers probably wouldn't care to be referred to in the diminutive.

But Isaiah once said: And a little child will lead them.

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