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ARTICLES

Summer lunch program feeds needy families

by Jean Denton
of The Catholic Virginian

Young grade-schooler Waylon Stamper and his mom were waiting in front of the community center in St. Charles, VA, when the group from nearby Holy Spirit Parish drove up with the lunches.

Waylon took two, politely thanked them and grinned as he peered inside his sacks.

For six weeks this summer, Holy Spirit Catholic Church of Jonesville provided lunch for about 50 children living in St. Charles' coal camps.

Some, like Waylon, came by the community center three days a week to pick up their lunchbags while others waited at the camps (rural "neighborhoods" that originally housed coal miners' families) and ran to the road to greet the volunteers making deliveries.

Talk about your happy meals!

"The kids come running out," said Rhonda Webb, one of the St. Charles Community Center volunteers. "You hear them yelling as you drive up, 'Lunch is here! Lunch is here!'

"People in the hollers don't come out," Ms. Webb, a native of St. Charles, explained. "Maybe they don't have a car or only have one car that's not available because somebody has to take it to work durin' the day. The kids can't get out."

Holy Spirit parishioner Linda Alsup, a teacher in the local schools since 1974, explained that most of the children at St. Charles Elementary School qualify for free breakfast and free lunch. They receive both meals only when school is open.



Helping fill the lunch bags are two unidentified volunteers.

But in summer they've had to go without. Until this year.

The people at Holy Spirit had heard about a similar feeding program started last summer by St. Anthony Parish in neighboring Norton. The two churches are in the same cluster and often coordinate ministries and share ideas.

When Ms. Alsup and fellow parish leaders learned the program was supported by a grant through the diocesan Appalachian Fund they seized on the opportunity and applied.

Holy Spirit received a \$1,250 grant to start the summer lunch program for St. Charles.

"The parishioners responded right away," said Melanie Jorgensen, another lay leader at Holy Spirit who helps coordinate the program. "This is a very active parish, but I've never seen such enthusiasm before."

Since the first week when Ms. Alsup announced it at Sunday Mass, nearly all the members attending (about 25 in the small parish), stay after the 8 a.m. Mass to pack the 140 lunches to be distributed during the week.

About 10 parishioners deliver the meals to St. Charles on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Others who aren't available during weekdays volunteer to do the grocery shopping.

"An important part of it is providing nutritious meals," Ms. Alsup said. "In selecting items for the lunches, we keep in mind federal guidelines for nutrition and then try to improve on that."

Toward the end of the project, program leaders realized the budget would fall slightly short of the amount needed to provide the necessary healthy food. But parishioners came through with generous contributions well over what was needed, Ms. Jorgensen noted.

"Besides feeding the children, a big reason we did this was to bring the parish together, and I just love how into it everybody is," she said. "It's not just about feeding but how we are being fed."



Waylon with his bag lunches as Melanie Jorgensen of Holy Spirit parish looks on.

***St. Mary's, Richlands,
begins 'backpack project' for
students***

As the Holy Spirit group set out lunches in the St. Charles community center on a recent Wednesday, several visitors stopped to chat with Ms. Alsup.

The Appalachian Fund is helping several parishes in far southwest Virginia feed hungry children in their communities. Besides the summer lunch programs provided by St. Anthony Church in Norton and Holy Spirit Church in Jonesville, St. Mary's Church in Richlands began providing weekend meals for low income children from their local elementary school last January.

St. Mary parishioner Cathy Bolling, who coordinates the "backpack project," explained that at the church's request, the school guidance counselor selected eight pupils she knew didn't have adequate food at home.

The parish bought backpacks and filled them with food to cover the child's weekend meals. Each Friday, the children picked up their backpacks from the counselor's office and returned them on Monday to be refilled the following week.

"We choose kid-friendly foods that the children can prepare themselves or open and eat, because they are on their own at home," Ms. Bolling said.

St. Mary's is a small church of Holy Family Parish. About six members participate in the backpack ministry, shopping for food, organizing and packing it and getting it to the school.

Others help support the project with monetary contributions, some providing a monthly "adopt-a-child" donation.

While initially funded by a \$1,250 grant from the Appalachian Fund, the program will expand this fall to serve 50 children in three schools in the Richlands area, Ms. Bolling noted.

This is being made possible because other community organizations have joined the effort, including a local business and the Kiwanis Club, she added.

"It is especially good to have Linda guiding this project, because she is someone the people here know," Ms. Jorgensen said.

A native of nearby Pennington Gap, Ms. Alsup indeed knows Lee County — the poorest county in Virginia — and having taught in St. Charles, she's familiar with the community and has a personal relationship with many families.

In planning how to most effectively get the lunches to the children who need them, she asked for suggestions from Teresa Webb who runs the community center with the help of her entire family.

"We know we'll have success when local people are involved," Ms. Alsup pointed out.

That has been the case with the community center serving as the distribution point. Members of the Webb family and another volunteer drive most of the lunches out to the coal camps that have names such as Monarch, Bonnie Blue and Kemmer Gem.

They are just as enthusiastic about the program as the Holy Spirit parishioners.

"You all did great," Ms. Webb said. "We have people calling us at the house to make sure their lunch is coming."

Ms. Alsup explained that St. Charles, a thriving community back when the coal industry was booming, was devastated by a flood in the mid-1970s and has been struggling with poverty ever since.

"Most people here are dependent on others to get by," she said, noting, however, that some people in the camps find work in the nearby prisons, the school district or the primary care clinic.

With a population of about 250, income is low and unemployment high.

But it is a community with a history of

The need in Tazewell County is great, Ms. Bolling pointed out. In the three schools from which children were selected for the program, 173 of 219 students qualify for free lunches, she said, adding, "One principal said that at her school only a handful of parents are even employed."

"So many people in the community have told me what a blessing [the backpack program] is for these children," Ms. Bolling said. "Well, yes it is. But it's such a blessing for us, too."

"Every time we pack these bags, to know some child will not go hungry that weekend is a real blessing."

parish will be able to make the ministry sustainable, allowing for the Appalachian Fund to continually support new social ministries," he said.

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self-respect and spunk, demonstrated by its homegrown, grassroots free clinic, established more than 30 years ago by a locally formed health council which now has 11 satellite facilities in the area.

Lee County can't afford to offer summer school, so for the foreseeable future, children who depend on school lunches can't depend on them in the summer. Holy Spirit Church plans to continue its lunch program next year to fill that need.

Justin Reilly, regional coordinator of the Richmond Diocese's Office of Justice and Peace who administers the Appalachian Fund, said Holy Spirit's grant will be renewed.

"But the hope is that eventually the

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