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A R T I C L E S

**Work trip to
Appalachia brings
joy, prayer**

by Hannah Snider
special to The Catholic Virginian

How would you like to give up a week of your precious summer vacation to spend time painting someone else's house in the noonday sun?

Would you want to go to a middle-of-nowhere small town without a cell phone?

Would you like to sleep in a tiny room with seven other teenagers?

When I first heard about St. Edward's high school mission trip to the Appalachia region, I wrote it off as "not my thing."

A week as far from home as New York City, in a small town I knew nothing about, with a large group of other teenagers, doing physical labor that could be, as far as I knew, dangerous — no way. I figured it was just something other people would do, and besides, I was busy — by which I mean "lazy."

Last year, my mom went on the mission trip as a chaperone. When she came back positively glowing, I just knew I had to look again and see for myself what this was all about.

When I went to the planning meetings, the returning youth and chaperones were so excited; there must be something special ahead.



Teenagers and adult leaders of the recent Appalachian Mission Trip in Clintwood are from St. Edward Parish in Richmond. Hannah Snider is at second from right in top row.

As it turned out, it was about repairing houses for the poor in the southwest region of Virginia.

This area is dominated by the coal mining industry and sparsely populated compared to the Richmond area, and poverty is common. Sister Jean Korkisch, a Sister of the Holy Cross living in Clintwood, runs the St. Joseph's Housing Repair Program to help bring dignity to those who aren't able to fix their houses all on their own.

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This program helps people all over Dickinson County where it's based, and brings in volunteer groups from all over the United States. These groups are mostly high school or college students on their summer or spring breaks.

They stay in the Dorothy Baker House, a white-painted comfortable place on Main Street, barely 10 feet from small St. Joseph's Catholic Church.

On Saturday, July 2, at 6 in the morning, the St. Edward group — 8 girls, 7 boys, and 8 chaperones — left in four rental vans for the road trip to Clintwood. It felt like quite an expedition, but we still reached our destination by afternoon — and bonded with the others in our vans a little in the meantime.

After we settled in (staking out our small personal space in the little bedrooms), we had plenty of time to play Frisbee in the park down the street before celebrating liturgy with the parishioners of St. Joseph's and then attending a music festival in the town park.

The next day was Sunday, so we didn't work; instead, we chose to either relax at a swimming pool or go on an 11-mile hike to pass the day.

Of the two choices, I chose the hike to a river gorge and it was grueling! But it was worth it to see the beauty God has blessed this region with — and again, we bonded a little more.

The fun continued on the Fourth of July when once again we had a day off of the work we hadn't even started yet. A parade of pickup trucks, fire engines, and kids on bikes goes down the Main Street of Clintwood to celebrate our country's independence, and our front porch was prime seating for the action.

On Tuesday, early in the morning, we started work. Our large group was split into three groups so we could work at three sites at once. The kinds of work we found ourselves doing were varied. At my work site, we were building a safer set of steps for an elderly couple, as well as repainting the sides and eaves of their house, caulking around the windows to waterproof them, and, by necessity, exterminating the local wasp population.

It took four days of hard work in the hot sun (unless there was a thunderstorm, which was often), but we were guided by some very capable supervisors. To close each day, we would gather in the living room and pray and reflect on the day.

We would be led in prayer by different youth leaders every evening, and though no two prayer experiences were the same, they were all meaningful.

On the last night before we left, we climbed to the top of a fire tower on a nearby mountain, and enshrouded in mist, we had our last prayer service together. As we read the story of the Transfiguration, the clouds broke for a minute to reveal a double rainbow.

All week, we kept each other going with our fellowship, and most importantly, we knew the real reward of being Christ to those who need our aid.

At the end of the work week, the older couple we had helped was so grateful. I really felt our hard work was worth it, and I would do it again in an instant.

I'm thankful that I looked beyond my normal boundaries to give the Appalachia mission trip a try.

My world was widened, as I saw places and lifestyles I had never thought about visiting on my own. I got a tiny taste of life in a town where half of the people are named "Mullins."

I took an 11-mile hike to an ancient gorge. I struggled to see the best fireworks of my life through a thick mist. I made friends with kids I pass in the hallways at school but had not known.

Most importantly, I was given my first taste of mission work, and I'm now eager to go out into the world and be the hands of Christ again.