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## Local teens tired, but glad they helped in St. Louis

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By **LYNDA HEMMERLING** Post-Tribune correspondent

ST. JOHN -- "That was the best week of my life; I can't wait to do that again," was a common reaction from teenagers returning from a summer mission trip to St. Louis.

The enthusiasm was almost tangible as the tired but fervent teens and their chaperones exited their 12-seater vans after the weeklong trip in which they painted houses, watched children and helped feed the hungry.

"Now that's the way to do a mission trip," said P.J. Anderson, youth director at St. John the Evangelist Catholic Parish, who said he already is planning next year's trip.

This year, Teens for Christ, the SJE teen club, went on a Catholic HEART Workcamp mission trip to St. Louis from late July to early August. The youths benefited by serving others and also by seeing other teens in the same situation.

"Being there was really powerful," Anderson said. "To be there with 400 other kids, they were able to see that it's not just our group serving others."

He said the 32 youths and five adult chaperones will remember the trip forever. They worked with more than 400 adult and teen volunteers from across the country.

The Catholic HEART Workcamp had 10,000 people helping in communities this summer. When the group began about 15 years ago, it had about 100 volunteers.

Catholic HEART Workcamp's mission is to revitalize communities and beautify homes for the elderly, disabled and those who cannot afford repairs. The group's goal is to inspire participants to serve in their communities.

Secondly, the mission is to empower participants to live as disciples of Christ by serving others and to foster the spiritual growth of each participant through the sacraments, Catholic faith sharing and prayer.

"That is our goal as well, to serve others and draw teenagers closer to Christ," Anderson said.

After the Teens for Christ worked side-by-side on teams with other adults and teenagers, they bonded at the end of each day with free time and praise time. Some of the events were similar to a Christian rock concert.

The talks, music and Mass touched so many people.

"Those who were not moved by the activities were in the minority," Anderson said.

Kim Estry, a junior at Lake Central High School, said she loved the trip, working with friends and making new friends. She was on last year's mission trip and plans to continue with such events.

Megan Larson, who also attended last year's mission trip to Mississippi, said she had been looking forward to the St. Louis trip for quite some time.

"Last year's trip was so much fun that I went again," said Larson, also an LC junior. "And this one just built on that experience."

She said the best part of the trip was spending time with residents of the area.

A typical day began with a 6:45 a.m. wake-up call and breakfast about 7. The workers left for their project sites about 8 and returned about 3:30 p.m. There was free time and an optional daily Mass.

After dinner, there were evening programs and youth devotions. Lights were out about 11 p.m., and the volunteers slept on the floors of St. Louis schools.

"I would recommend that everyone try to experience something like this at least once in their lives," Larson said.

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