High school service trip offers inspiration

BY MONICA MURPHY

SOUTH BEND — Growing up in this city, I have been exposed to many visions, ideas, customs and bright dreams. My journey to Jonesville, Va., with the St. Joseph Parish Youth Group, Holy Cross Father Nate Wills and adult leaders would be a great challenge, an experience that would shed a brighter light on my walk with Christ.

Not accustomed to a world that experiences such poverty allowed me to look at the reasons why I was called to participate on this service trip. Traveling with approximately 50 other committed volunteers, June 6-13, I was ready to get my feet wet.

Driving 15 minutes into Jonesville, I saw the poverty with my own eyes. This poverty did not compare with what I had seen on television. It was as if I was awoken from an unbelievable dream. People living in homes that were torn apart and unlivable brought tears of frustration to my face. I thought about the children who were outside playing in their yard and how they lived in such harsh conditions.

Our group of 50 divided into seven teams for the week. My team worked on a woman’s house. Her name was Alice, a single mother with four grown children. A very kind, humble and heartfelt woman, Alice allowed us into her home. Through her eyes, I could see her beautiful cry for hope.

Our task was to pull up the old floor in Alice’s home and replace it with a new one. Walking through her home for the first time was like walking into a prison of despair. Quickly I thought of her safety, her well-being and her dignity as a human being.

Her bathroom did not work, and the rest of her house was in the slow process of being renovated. Thankfully, her brother lived right next door and she could use the bathroom in his house. She fell through the floor a few years ago as she was trying to work on repairing her home.

Each team completed a different task during the week. Whether it was putting new siding on a home, tearing down an old roof or pulling up a floor; we all put our best effort and strength into our work.

A different way of life rises in the mountains of Appalachia. Despite their difficulties, I found that these brothers and sisters are filled with tremendous faith. Furthermore, the residents welcomed us with a warm, inviting community and were full of fruitful ambitions. I received support and friendship from those who passed us by on the streets. What really struck me was how close this community was.

I reevaluated the blessings in my life — to be thankful for a hairbrush, fruits and vegetables, towels, soap and the basic things to survive. These are things that I tended to never thank God for in the past.

The community in Jonesville taught me true happiness. Just through interacting and having the chance to hear their stories, these families showed me greater visions. They allowed me to see the face of God working in their lives. They invited me to cherish my fellow neighbors. They provided me with greater hope for the future.

Money in one’s pocket, the house that one lives in, or the clothes on one’s back are not nearly as important as spreading the love of Christ through service. My greatest prayer for our world is to look beyond the stereotypes, the judgments or the critical elements of those who are not the same as we are.

As Americans we need to really step out of our comfort zones and live in unity. I challenge our world with this idea: Wouldn’t it be truly joyful to face God one day and tell him that we used all of our gifts and talents to serve him completely. I challenge you this summer to serve in your local community, our country and world.

As Saint Joseph High School principal and one of our adult volunteers, Susan Richter, said: “Though these families may not be rich in material things, they are rich in love.”

Monica Murphy is a 2009 graduate of Saint Joseph’s High School and an incoming freshman at Saint Mary’s College, Notre Dame.