

View From the Pew

By Meredith Mackin Rilley

It's a funny little anecdote that has two versions. The one that draws a better laugh goes like this: New Fairfield native, Mike Gizzo, is standing at the altar waiting for his bride to come down the church aisle. He is beaming with anticipation. Msgr. Ryan leans in close to him. Mike surely anticipates some last minute wisdom that his pastor might impart at this particularly poignant moment in his life. "Mike," he whispers. "Do you have any interest in being the new Youth Minister?" Bewildered, Mike turns to Msgr. Ryan and says, "This moment isn't really the best for me to decide, Monsignor. I'm kind of busy right now. Can it wait until I get back from my honeymoon?!" That's Mike's version. Of course, the way Msgr. Ryan recounts the tale, his manners were intact, having actually posed the question during some down time he and Mike had before they were even in the church. The gift of story telling allows for the use of embellishment from time to time, does it not? Since it's not possible to accurately present the facts here, having not tracked down the witnesses, there is one truth that is clear: The question was posed to the right man for the job.

St. Edward's Youth Group has gone through a metamorphosis in the past couple of years and is about to launch into what Mike Gizzo hopes is the start of a new era in reaching out to New Fairfield's teens. One year ago, there was no Senior Youth Group (SYG) offering choices for the youth of the parish; There was only one facet of youth ministry: Work Camp, which is a non-denominational mission project that gives teens a chance to render service to those in need through home repair. Participation in the pre-existing SYG had dwindled, but Work Camp had continued to grow. Due to schedule or interest in another segment of youth programs, the effort to combine the two groups at one point inadvertently excluded teens who wanted a choice. To keep the choices active, Mike will also be working together with Fr. Joe, who currently oversees Work Camp, and the Work Camp leaders to continue that mission's option and experience. In an effort to revive the SYG choice, Msgr. Ryan overheard Mike Gizzo mention that he'd like to work with youth, and, having known Mike and his family for years, he saw a perfect fit. "He got me thinking," Mike said, reflecting on Msgr.'s now infamous altar proposition. "It's an incredible challenge. Things come at us for reasons. I'm not sure what the reason is, but I'm up for this new challenge."

One of these challenges is attracting the teens in the first place and showing them the separation between Work Camp and SYG. Mike says, "Work Camp is great, but it's not for everyone. Work Camp is not Youth Group." Last fall, Mike began his position as Youth Minister and began with a simple notice in the bulletin, calling on high school kids to join the new SYG. What he ended up with was a group of only eleven teens, whose small number turned out to be a blessing. "We developed the group quietly. I said to them, 'We have to attract more kids. Tell me what you want to do in the program and I'll facilitate it.' They went with it and dove right in, spending last year developing the program themselves." These kids are now the Council of the Senior Youth Group.

Mike, whose background at 29 is well suited for the Youth Minister position, teaches Business Education and is a soccer coach at Carmel High School. He is also an Eagle Scout, has his BA in Business Administration and his MA in Education, has helped to develop a local soccer academy, and had always been involved in youth programs in his childhood. And, although this is his first time running a religious-based program, it seems a natural progression from his past and current activities.

“On Sunday nights, we meet after the 5:15 Teen Mass. It’s not a time for a commitment, but a time for a kid to be a kid. We’re doing this in a Christian way of life, but it’s not like we’re extending CCD class. This is not Faith Formation. We’re not going to sit around and read scripture.” What it is is a well-organized series of quality activities that range from playing games and going bowling to a week-long trip to Soulfest.

Soulfest is one of many Mission Trips the Council has chosen to offer to its members for the upcoming school year and the following summer. The two definite trips planned so far are: 1) A weekend at Steubenville in Attleboro, MA, which is a Catholic retreat weekend, which will have speakers, prayers, adoration and more. 2) The week-long trip to Soulfest, in New Hampshire, which is the biggest Christian music festival in New England. There are 100 speakers and bands at this event! As the year continues, there will be more events added, including a Youth Retreat at Seton Neuman Center, which is a retreat house in Danbury. It’s overnight and open to all high school students in the St. Edward’s parish. There’s also the possibility of a day trip to “Rock the Sound”, which is a concert in Bridgeport in November, where five different bands will play. Lastly, they hope to include a leadership and team building night at Great Hollow Wilderness in the spring. The difference between these missions and Work Camp is where Work Camp fills a spiritual need by being of service, these new missions offer up the other end of the faith-based path, which is feeding those needs through spiritual retreat. It is both Msgr. Ryan’s and Mike Gizzo’s hope that this range of choices will attract more teens and give them a broader view of a faith experience.

One goal the Council has already achieved is taking back the 5:15 Mass for the teens. Before Mass, there is a teen prayer group that meets, which is simply quiet time for teens to pray with peers. After Mass, the Youth Group meets weekly, each week in the month having a specific goal: 1 week includes bringing in different people to give the kids a different perspective on how to pray. A second week will be hanging out and playing games. A third week will be focused on the Mission Trips. The fourth week will be concentrating on the Liturgy planning for the Teen Mass.

The Mass itself is one way that SYG Council member, Marni Cutler, hopes to attract teens to the group. “Originally, I joined the group to see what it was about. Then, our vision was to get high schoolers involved in church and start up the teen Mass.” Part of this transition is changing the music to more contemporary Christian music that appeals to teens with the help of Rob Brereton, Contemporary Choir Director who also plays the music for the Teen Mass. “There is a Teen Choir, but right now it only has a couple of members,” Marni said. She and the other council members hope the music will be a draw. At this point, they’ve only added a modern song here and there, but have already heard at

least one peer's optimistic interest. "I'm excited for the program," Marni said. "I'm wondering how everyone else will take it. I'm hoping we can get high schoolers involved in Mass."

Adding to the experience, Youth Group members will also be trained to participate in Mass as lectors, ushers, Eucharistic Ministers, etc. The Council will even go through the scripture, find a theme according to the Liturgical Calendar and pass it along to the priests who will preach on the choice. Mike said, "We want it to feel like the teens have ownership of the Mass. We're going to attempt to remove them from their parents to sit them together, so that it is a bonding experience. The hope is if it's music they know and they're in a group, they'll let go and sing. There's strength in numbers,"

Mike sees the Senior Youth Group as an outlet for students who are becoming too old, too fast. He wants the teens to learn to make appropriate decisions about their lives. "I want the kids to grow as people, make healthy relationships, have somewhere healthy to turn to when they need someone to talk to. If we can get high schoolers to come to our group and make friends with someone they wouldn't have spoken to before, that is success. Even if I have kids showing up and causing mayhem, they're still there and getting something out of it." Pope Benedict XVI has called us to use every gift and every form of technology to make known the love of God for His children. In that very bright light, Mike Gizzo and the Teen Council members, with the overwhelming support of Msgr. Ryan, have dedicated their gifts, hearts and minds together to offer an impressive program that not only makes known the love of God to His children, but also the love of our community to our children.