

30-Hours for Poverty has impact on youth

TAMARA FERGUSON

In April St. Simon's Oakville held their annual 30-Hours for Poverty overnight program for youth.

Currently in its sixth year, it started as a social justice initiative to introduce youth to poverty issues existing closer to home. It is popular with the junior and senior youth and attracts youth from other churches in Oakville and Burlington.

While most youth are aware of poverty in third world countries, many do not realize that there are people struggling financially in their own backyards. "I felt it was important for the youth to be involved in social justice activities and to understand we have poverty in Oakville," said Youth Ministry Co-ordinator and 30-Hours leader Robyn Michell, who has been involved with 30-Hours since its inception. "I also wanted them to know that they can get involved in helping other people at any age."

Many were not expecting to hear that approximately 8% of the Oakville population live below the poverty line. "Poverty is a worldwide issue but here in Oakville people try and hide those who are suffering because they are afraid it will change the image of Oakville," offered 15 year old Amy Davies. Lynley McIntee, 12, was shocked to hear about "the number of people who barely had enough to live on."

Participants arrived by 4:30 p.m. on Friday and, after intro-

ductions and orientation, had dinner. The meals were not fancy and were made with items found at a food bank, such as pasta or soup.

Community speakers introduced topics like social assistance, emergency housing, homelessness, hunger and mental health. This year, Michelle Knoll, Executive Director of the Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre spoke about poverty in Oakville, and how OPNC works with various individuals and community groups, faith organizations, the town of Oakville and Halton Region to address poverty.

On Saturday morning it was off to Kerr Street Ministries to make and serve breakfast for over 100 people, including elderly, singles, couples and families with young children. It was hectic, but the most rewarding for the youth. "I found making breakfast for all of the people really inspiring ... all of the people there were thanking us for everything and being so appreciative," reflected Nick Attard, 14. Seeing the different people who come to Kerr Street Ministries, it is a real eye-opener for many but confirmed, at least for Lynley McIntee, "Everyone is a child of God. Everyone deserves His compassion."

After a debriefing and lunch, the youth visited Oakville's Fare Share Food Bank, the town's only food bank. They were told its history, how it is runs and how food is distributed. After a tour of the facility they sorted food into various bins and onto shelves.



Lynley McIntee and Aidan Ferguson sorted food at the Fare Share Food Bank during their 30-Hours for Poverty experience.

Photo: Tamara Ferguson

Cleaning products and personal items—toothpaste, shampoo and diapers—were also sorted and organized.

Afterwards, the group returned to the church for a service of reflection. Rector Darcey Lazerte asked the participants to share what they had learned and led the group in prayer before conducting a Eucharist in the round.

New to 30-Hours this year was the labyrinth walk—brought in and laid out on the floor of the church hall—led by parishioner Laurie Kondo. The purpose of this exercise was to introduce the youth—most had never walked or seen a labyrinth—to another

way of quietly meditating on what they had experienced during the program. "I found the labyrinth walk most interesting because it was relaxing and my time to pray and reflect," said Aidan Ferguson, 12.

Saturday evening is time to wind down, socialize and watch a social justice-themed movie. While the 30 hours spent on learning about poverty is intense, youth come away with some valuable insights and lessons. "I think we need to show more people the right thing to do so they can show their friends and spread the message," commented Jacob Joly, 13.

30-Hours helps youth not to take the basics of life and what they have for granted. "I got to see how lucky I am and it motivated me to give something back to the community," reflected Matthew Romaniuk, 13. Robyn Michell agrees. "I love the whole 30-Hours program. Just think, you are taking youth who are distant from poverty and putting them into situations where they meet people, help people and put a face to poverty. That is when they start to understand the injustice."

Tamara Ferguson is a parishioner of St. Simon's Oakville.