

FROM THE ST. STEPHEN'S BIRMINGHAM NEWSLETTER – BY JAMIE PLOTT

St. Francis of Assisi is quoted as saying "Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words." It is in this quote that I think the Sawyerville Work Project is best described and explained. For 10 days, close to 60 youth, college, and adult staff representing the Diocese of Alabama joined together with staff from Sawyerville and Greensboro to put on a day camp for 200 children of the area. We worship, sing, play, pray, swim, eat, sweat, and ride the bus together while getting to know people that we would probably never meet otherwise.

This year's theme was "Move your hands, Move your feet, Follow the Way, Follow the Beat." Campers are split into two camps – upper and lower – by age. The upper camp program focused on ways we might "Follow the Way" – decisions we make daily that affect our relationship with God and each other. We used parables and stories of the disciples to illustrate these personal decisions. The lower camp focused on ways that we were all part of a bigger plan – we are all parts of one Body and we must learn to work together and not against each other. In addition we did all the regular camp things – tie dye, basketball, arts and crafts, SWIMMING, reading, and a carnival on the last day.

One of the most amazing things about the camp is the relationships that have been formed over the past 11 years of the camp. Brad Landry, staff member and youth minister at St. Mary's, says it best, "As we opened the doors to the camper's registration on Sunday afternoon, a flood of young children came into the hot gymnasium. What I saw next truly set the tone for the week: numerous campers ran to their counselors from years past and jumped into their arms. The Sawyerville Work Project has been investing in the lives of Hale County children for more than a decade. The trust to build those close relationships has been earned and fostered over the years. This ongoing relationship makes all the difference." Georganne Perrine offered, "As a coordinator for the Sawyerville Work Project for the second year and as registrar for its campers, I felt I had a good sense of how the week would run and an idea of what to expect. On one hand, I was right. When it came to schedules, registration, activities and events I was right on target. What I was unexpectedly overwhelmed with was the outpouring of gratitude, joy and laughter. These familiar sounds filled our days as the children of the Black belt engaged in summer activities, community with one another and relationship with our young people from the Diocese. To see familiar faces returning from last year and the enthusiasm these children feel about "camp" is overwhelming. I am truly blessed to be involved in such a powerful expression of God's purpose for us and realization that it is in the giving that we receive." It is the kind of relationships Brad and Georganne describe that have taken hold of me and made Sawyerville the way I choose to live out my ministry.

You can not imagine the effort it takes to create this consistency in a new camp every year with no facility, no full time staff, and no permanent funding. I am consistently overwhelmed by the generosity of this Diocese, and in particular the generosity of St. Stephen's to this project. Members of St. Stephen's donated arts and crafts supplies, cleaning supplies, sports equipment, and books; prayed for and wrote letters to support and uplift the staff that went down for the week; given lots of money to help this project happen and continue; and offered their individual and unique talents in ways that are so creative and giving. I have been invited to speak about the project to several formal and informal groups in the parish. Although I consistently hear people say that their effort was in no way special, until you are paint-less in a room of 20 6 year olds can you understand the gift of a bottle of tempera paint. Or a broom. Or a box of garbage bags. Believe me these are true gifts of the heart and this camp would not happen without them.

Thank you again to everyone who donated their time, talents, money and gifts to this project. Thank you to everyone who invited me to speak to their group about this powerful force in my life. Thank you to everyone who asked me how it went and how it works. And I invite you to get involved if you are intrigued by this project. St. Francis also said, "Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible."