

Water Street reaches out to urban teens

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By DAVID O'CONNOR, Staff Writer

Lancaster teen Angel Vasquez remembers wondering "Who was I really when I first started coming here?"

He is sitting in a room full of people his own age inside Lancaster's Teen Haven, a ministry of Water Street Ministries based on South Queen Street.

The others nod knowingly as Vasquez says he "realized I was someone who was covered by all of these layers" to protect himself from other people.

"But then this summer ... what we did started taking off those layers. And I found out who I really was."

The 17-year-old Lancaster Mennonite School junior took that important step this summer by being a part of Teen Haven's Operation Barnabas, a new program aimed at reaching urban youths.

No less than seven young people, thanks to the Teen Haven program, found meaning through hard work, helping others and "getting outside of themselves," as an adult organizer says.

Operation Barnabas features week-long overnight camps, both within Teen Haven and with other youth groups, serving for several days in North Philadelphia with service projects and street evangelism, or serving locally at churches' vacation Bible schools or other community projects.

For Vasquez, of East Marion Street in Lancaster, the program came at the perfect time.

"Barnabas means 'son of encouragement,' and that's who I see myself as now," an encourager, he says.

"Before, in my heart I knew I was struggling ... now, it's good in my heart to know who I am."

Vasquez has had his share of challenges.

His biological father isn't in his life. His mom and stepdad are going through a divorce, and he is facing other family struggles.

Plus he's navigating the traditional teen issues of identity and relationships. But through Teen Haven, he has found a greater wisdom and identity in Jesus, organizers say.

An adult Teen Haven leader, the Rev. Andy Rodriguez, points out how "there's just something about serving others that kind of gets you out of yourself.

"It's hard to be selfish and thinking of yourself when you're serving others," Rodriguez says.

Operation Barnabas "is about developing character," said Maria Schaszberger, director of communications of Water Street Ministries.

"It prepares urban teens for leadership in their community and their church."

The program has proven successful, as participating teens, many of whom plan to hold leadership positions in the future, learn to model key biblical concepts of humility and sacrifice in their daily lives among friends and family, she says.

Teen Haven always has included service projects as part of its summer programming.

With Operation Barnabas, however, staff members identified certain youths as having leadership potential and invited them to participate in the program.

"It was a character development program for potential leaders with a stated goal and vision," Schaszberger said, and is expected to expand to Teen Haven locations in York and Philadelphia.

Along with Vasquez, other young people involved were Genesis Cubilete and her older sister Danielyse, Diana Serrano, Randy Rosa, OzzieJeanPier Torres and Ivan DeJesus.

Serrano, who's out of her teens, took part in this summer's Barnabas effort and has accepted a position working at Lancaster's Washington Elementary School.

"God really opened that door for me, to connect with the community and be an outreach worker, reach out to students and families with truancy issues," she says.

"And Teen Haven really showed me how to work as a team player ... and that's something that the school really focuses on."

Under the overall leadership of Rodriguez, who's the youth center's director, Nina Maldonado and Jose Jimenez were the coordinators for the young women and young men, respectively.

Rodriguez says he loves to watch as the younger people "grew in being flexible and adaptable. ... I know there are churches who say, 'We thank God for the Teen Haven crew.'"

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