

How Catholic Schools Teach Compassion Through Social Service

Emily works with children who have disabilities. Rinaldo serves food at a soup kitchen, and Audrey Anne helps build homes for low-income families. These students are just some of the thousands whose volunteer work is a mandatory part of their curriculum. Text by Moira Ambrose Connelly, photos by Doug McDonough

ovation: "At first," she says, "it didn't seem like they noticed I was there, but after a while they opened up. Now they know my name. The first time one of them held my hand, I really felt like I was helping."

Traci Baugh, the classroom teacher, appreciates Emily's help. "It's always great to have an extra hand," she says. "We just wish Emily could come more often."

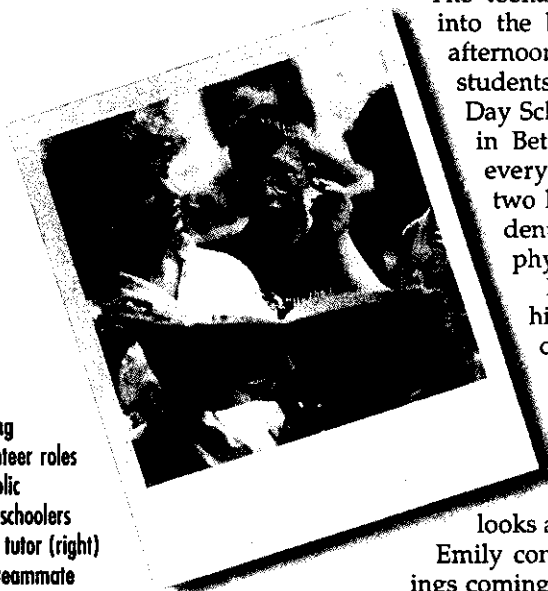
Emily's story is only one of thousands that could be told each year about Catholic students around the country. Many of these students perform a variety of social services, often by working through volunteer organizations, school-sponsored clubs, or youth groups. An increasing number of students do service work to meet graduation requirements for Catholic high schools and at least one Catholic college. These institutions have so linked Catholic education and a call to serve that they have made social action a mandatory part of the curriculum.

Statistics gathered by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) show that, in 1983, 20 percent of U.S. Catholic high schools required social services. Michael Guerra, NCEA's executive director of the secondary school department, says, "Anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of schools moving toward requiring some kind of service has increased substantially in the last eight years."

On a mild winter afternoon, I follow four teenage girls into a public school in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. The teenagers walk confidently into the building to begin their afternoon as volunteers. The girls, students at Stone Ridge Country Day School of the Sacred Heart in Bethesda, Maryland, come every Wednesday to spend two hours working with students who are mentally and physically disabled.

I trail Emily Harrison, a high school junior, to the classroom where she works. As she enters, JoAnn Berry, the classroom aide, says, "Here's Emily!" One boy waves; another looks at Emily and smiles.

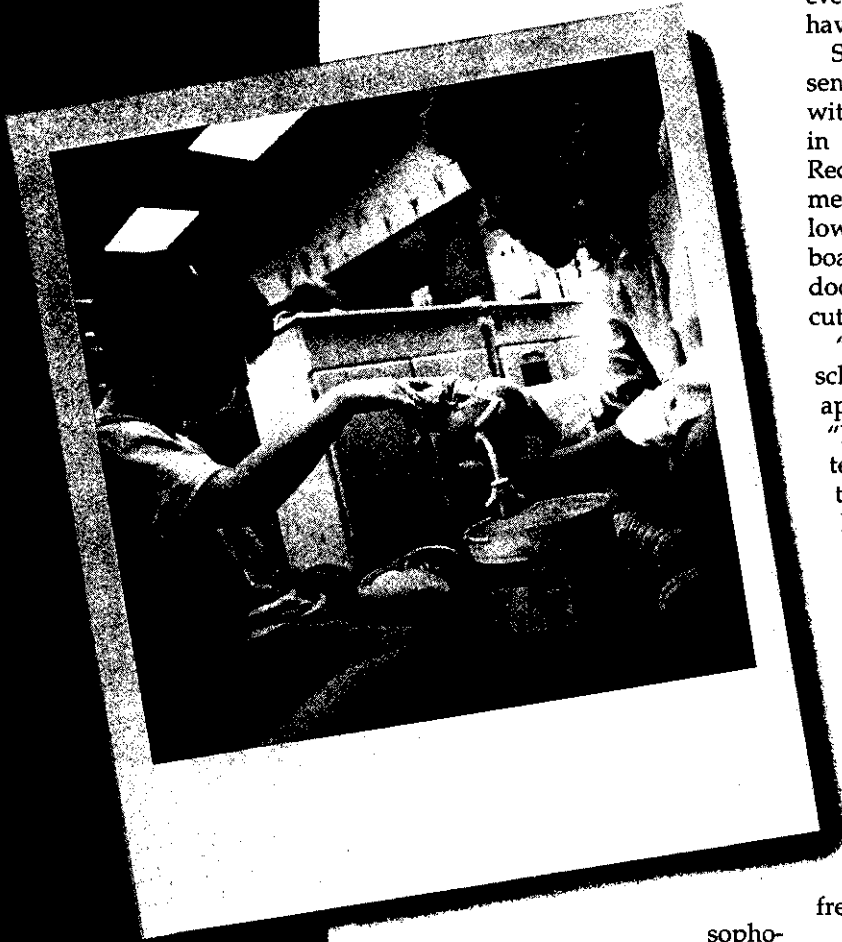
Emily considers the simple greetings coming from this group of children with special needs a standing



Among volunteer roles Catholic high schoolers play: tutor (right) and teammate (opposite page).

**'If We Haven't Taught Compassion,
Then We Have Failed'**

At Stone Ridge, the all-girls high school that Emily attends, social service is a four-year commitment that is fulfilled weekly during school hours. On Wednesday afternoons,



sophomores, juniors and seniors work at volunteer sites from 1 to 3 p.m. Freshmen spend the first year on campus, where Stone Ridge seniors, faculty and guest lecturers prepare them for future site work.

Girls travel no more than 40 minutes to their service sites—some in surrounding Montgomery County, Maryland, others in nearby Washington, D.C. Students often drive other students, but some walk, are driven by parents or faculty members, or take the Metro.

While most students enjoy social action, they are not angelic do-gooders. They don't always like their sites (even though, for the most part, they get to choose them) and they are

not oblivious to the practical advantages of service work. Some have discovered careers that they would like to pursue and others have crossed occupations off their list of possibilities. All say that service work strengthens their college applications. The overriding response, however, is simply a pleased feeling of having helped another person.

Seventeen-year-old Stone Ridge senior Audrey Anne Sukacz works with a Habitat for Humanity chapter in Montgomery County, Maryland. Recently she helped finish the basement of a house that was built for a low-income family. She nailed wall-board, helped to finish windows and doors, and did other measuring and cutting.

"Obviously, I like the break from school and the work looks good on applications for college," she admits. "But, working with people also teaches you to be sensitive to what they need. [Working with Habitat] has made me aware of the homeless issue. I learned that even though some people can't afford regular housing, they are still regular people."

Natalie Knazek, another Stone Ridge senior, has spent the Wednesday afternoons of the past two years working for Greenpeace. "I am working on the Antarctic campaign," she says. "We want to establish Antarctica as a world park free of commercialization."

Knazek's work has helped her identify a possible career. "I'm potentially interested in the kind of work they do," she says. "It's an incredible learning experience to work with such accomplished environmentalists."

Senior Flavia Jimenez works with "boarder babies" at Howard University Hospital in Washington, D.C. Boarder babies are infants who have been abandoned by their parents, but are not yet official wards of the state so they cannot be adopted. Since they have no home, they stay in the hospital. Because the parents of some of the babies had AIDS or were drug users, the infants sometimes show symptoms of AIDS or drug addiction.

Howard University Hospital is

Jimenez's favorite site so far. "I actually enjoy going to social action this year. Before [this year], I haven't," she says. "We like being there so much that we stay longer than we have to."

At the hospital, Jimenez plays with the babies and gives them individual attention. "The nurses are really busy," she says. "They tend not to play with the babies as much as a mother at home who gives a baby full attention."

Alex Swezey and Anne Holmes are Stone Ridge juniors who work at Martha's Table, a soup kitchen in Washington, D.C. They bag pastries and prepare sandwiches for a cart which travels city streets giving away food. Both girls believe that they learn things in the soup kitchen that they could not learn at school. "Working there makes us more aware of the reality of society," says Holmes. "I think a lot of people think homeless people are mean and grouchy, but they're just hungry."

Swezey says, "Now I can better imagine people outside all the time in the cold. Working at Martha's Table is real-life education. It subjects us to people who are different from us."

Stone Ridge students talk about "social action" as nonchalantly as they might talk about algebra. To them it is like another class, an integral part of their week.

Dean of Students Patricia Prince says that social action "is not extra, not a weekend thing, but part of their education. We are willing to sacrifice part of the school day to make it part of their school experience."

Senior Flavia Jimenez notes, "School gives you history and math, but you have to go beyond that. Working with the homeless, the elderly, and boarder babies allows us to see what's out there."

Most service programs in Catholic high schools and colleges were founded in response to the belief that Christians have a social mission in the world.

The 20-year-old program at Stone Ridge specifically addresses one of the goals at Sacred Heart schools: "To educate to a social awareness that impels to action." Campus minister Myrtle Hendricks says, "We incorporate spirituality and sensitivity to so-

cial justice in our program. Part of the Christian ethic is responsibility to our sisters and brothers. We have a responsibility to the human family and to teaching the whole child. If we haven't taught compassion then we have failed."

'Are You the Tutors From Gonzaga?'

At Gonzaga College High School, a Jesuit boys' school in Washington, D.C., the mandatory service program is based on a similar understanding. "Christ says the poor are the chosen ones. We learn from the poor and have an obligation to assist them since we are not poor," says social justice teacher Mark McCaig.

As part of his introduction to Gonzaga's service program, McCaig quotes the late superior general of the Society of Jesus, Pedro Arrupe: "Today our prime educational objective must be to form men and women for others...men and women who cannot conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbors; men and women completely convinced that the love of God which does not issue in justice for men and women is a farce."

Started in 1973, the service program at Gonzaga College High School requires 40 hours of all seniors. In conjunction with a class in social justice, 80 seniors per semester work at seven different service sites.

Since Gonzaga is located in inner-city Washington, D.C., its students have easy access to sites that serve people poorer than themselves. Much of their service work is done with programs that use campus or parish facilities or at sites within walking distance of the school.

Gonzaga senior Rinaldo Washington works at a soup kitchen serving food, cleaning tables, making coffee and washing dishes. Homeless people are not new to Washington because he sees them every day on the streets near his school, but working at the soup kitchen made the connection personal. "Just walking by homeless people you might develop stereotypes, but in contact with them you learn more about who they are," he says.

Chris Fontaine works in the Gonzaga gym with a Special Olym-

pics program. He walks, jumps rope or plays basketball with athletes who are physically and mentally disabled. Fontaine says he now has "a lot more respect" for people whose careers are dedicated to working with persons with disabilities. He says that by seeing them every week "handicapped people do not seem so strange."

One sensitive issue that teachers and administrators face in requiring social service is safety. Some service sites are located in poor areas plagued by crime and drugs or involve work with AIDS victims.

Gonzaga senior Sean Griffin was asked for his money at knifepoint one afternoon while walking to the community center where he tutored elementary school children. Griffin shrugs and says that he did not turn over his money. "But nothing happened," he says, "because a bunch of my friends were behind me. It made me understand how much trouble and violence goes on."

Senior Teddy Carter mentions a drive-by shooting that occurred right after he left the soup kitchen where he was working.

Social justice teacher Mark McCaig agrees that safety is a concern, but stresses that students have not encountered serious trouble. For the first few weeks, he escorts the students who tutor at the community center. After that students walk together in large groups.

"The kids get used to the situation," he says, "and the neighborhood gets used to the kids: One day a little girl said, 'Are you the tutors from Gonzaga?' So they knew who we were."

McCaig believes that learning about the living conditions of the poor is key to the social service experience: "Part of this is not to hold their hand," he says.

Because faculty members often accompany students to sites in rough neighborhoods and administrators choose sites and tasks carefully, few parents are concerned about safety. (When one Stone Ridge parent worried that a daughter could contract AIDS from working with boarder babies who might be HIV-positive, the student was moved to another site.

Other students who continued this service alongside professionals served to dispel that parent's concern by their example.)

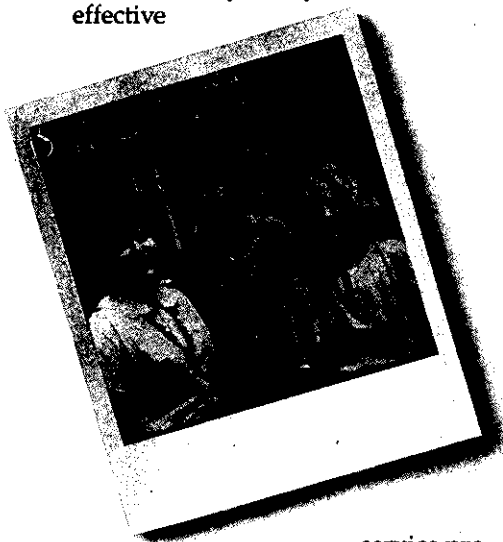
Solid Social Service Programs: A Three-Step Approach

Service programs thrive at Catholic colleges as well. Charles Hagan, representative for Higher Education and Campus Ministry of the U.S. Catholic Conference, says, "Part of living out faith is serving other people. Catholic colleges ought to be more involved in service than secular colleges because of the faith aspect."

He says that colleges encourage service because they "want to counteract the preprofessional idea of just being [in school] to get a job."

According to Hagan, the number of service programs in Catholic colleges and universities has increased dramatically since Vatican II. He credits the emphasis on Catholic social teaching that began in the 1960's for the increase.

Based on his experience with service ministries in Catholic colleges, Hagan stresses that three elements are key to any effective



service program: orientation, site experience and theological reflection.

In the orientation, he says, "People are screened and sites are chosen. Participants discuss expectations, what they can and can't do at their sites, and what to be wary of."

For example, as part of the year-long orientation to the social action program at Stone Ridge, senior Leslie Nauser teaches freshmen about

"myths and stereotypes. Our responsibility to humanity is emphasized. We believe you cannot help someone until you understand their limitations—for them the reality of their existence. We place students in wheelchairs," she explains, "to have them attempt to maneuver down a hall, or in role plays in which we reduce students to poverty or to a lonely elderly person who is faced with the decision of entering a nursing home. Then we ask students to attempt to explain how they plan to adjust, react or survive in our society."

The second component of a solid service program, site experience, is "part of sensitizing the person to the conditions that exist in society," Hagan says. After seeing poverty firsthand, he explains, students might wonder, "Why do I have a right to make \$100,000 a year when some people don't have enough to eat?"

"You have to get people to raise the questions for themselves," he notes. "You have to allow the experience to change people. What is important is the growth that takes place in the individual person, not just the social work he may do."

Hagan stresses the importance of inner growth. Since most students don't work at a site long enough to see change, the most profound change that occurs in service work often takes place inside the students.

The third leg of a good service program is theological reflection. Readings and class discussion "make the link between action and theology," says Hagan, "But this is the element people will most often drop. We are an activist society; we don't like to think."

High school social justice teacher Mark McCaig agrees that reflection is crucial, but he finds it is the part of social service that interests students the least. He has found that students "don't make the connection between spirituality and service work. They don't see a direct association."

While using Church documents to demonstrate the theological foundation of service, McCaig also encourages students to share stories of what they do at their service sites and how the experience has affected them. The personal accounts bring a more posi-

tive student response. "I ask them to describe what a day is like where they work or get them to identify with someone they look up to at their service site," he says.

Building Service Into the 'Culture of the College'

Among Catholic colleges, the great majority of service programs are voluntary. The issue of making these programs mandatory is controversial. In the past five years or so, the controversy has heated up.

Professor Kathleen Mass Weigert of the University of Notre Dame says that few colleges have made service mandatory, although "the issue of required service has been intensely discussed at the college level for the past few years."

Weigert says, "The requirements say what matters most. If we are Christian and say service is important, then we have to build it into the system."

With a differing viewpoint, Joe Pettit, vice president for planning and institutional research at Georgetown University, explains, "A lot of our students do service work voluntarily. We simply would not make it mandatory because we consider our students adults. I don't think you mandatorily tell adults what to do. If you want to kill a spirit of community service on a campus, you mandate it."

De Paul University's coordinator for public service programs, Vincenzian Father Paul Golden, says that his university is trying to build service into the "culture of the college," although it is not a requirement for graduation.

Father Golden says the administration is "inviting faculty to redesign courses so there is a service component to the course work." The university will reduce the tuition for a particular course by 50 percent if the majority of the learning in the course is gained through service. In addition, the college increasingly looks for service experience among the students it accepts. It also offers full scholarships to some who have done community service and continue to serve while in college.

At least one Catholic college, however, requires social service. In Los Angeles, at the small, all-women Mt.

St. Mary's College, students in the Associate of Arts program must complete 25 hours of service in conjunction with a social action class.

Program director Sr. Kathleen Mary McCarthy, C.S.J., says that, among other things, students do "jail ministry, catechetical work, teach English as a second language, work with emotionally disturbed students and as aides in the parish school." Students keep a journal and participate in theological reflection as well.

McCarthy's students are mostly minority women and the service is performed in the college's inner-city neighborhood. "We teach that women can hold their heads high and serve as Jesus did," says McCarthy. "What Jesus did was to walk with people and what we do is to walk with people."

Kathleen Mass Weigert says that requiring social service of their students is "one instance in which the high schools are going to push the colleges." She believes that in the next decade more Catholic colleges will make service a part of the curriculum.

People Who Are Not Afraid to Initiate Change

The overall success of service programs can be measured by the large number of students who continue service work after their required service is over. Some students choose careers based on their volunteer experience. One Stone Ridge alumna decided to be a social worker after her experience with the high school social action program.

In addition, students who have done service work in high school or college tend to be accomplished veterans, people who are not afraid to initiate change or start new programs where they see a need.

Stone Ridge Dean of Students Patricia Prince says that one graduate of the school began a campaign at her college to make the campus more accessible for the handicapped.

"Another alumna organized a group at her college to visit nursing homes. Because of her social action experience she knew how to organize a group and had the confidence to do it," says Prince.

On the winter afternoon I accompany students to the public school

where they volunteer, their confidence is obvious. They seem very comfortable in this group of children with special needs.

In the classroom I visit, student Emily Harrison sits in a child-sized chair and helps "Dan" to color. As she works with Dan, "Bobby" decides he wants some of her attention. Bobby taps her on the shoulder and points at the letters he is tracing. His teacher had made dotted outlines of the letters of the alphabet and he has traced the shapes. He wants Emily to write out some more letters.

Later in the afternoon, Emily entertains an undersized boy while the school nurse feeds him through a tube in his stomach. The nurse places a large syringe full of liquid at the end of the tube and pushes the liquid gently through the tube into the boy's stomach. Emily holds the child's hand and dangles keys in front of him while he "eats."

As the school day ends, Emily takes two children by the hand and leads them to the front door to wait for their school bus. As she leaves the building, Emily and the other Stone Ridge students pass a bulletin board that is decorated with a photo of each one of them. Over the Polaroid snapshots are the words, "Our Generous Volunteers." ■

Maira Ambrose Connelly is a free-lance writer. She has a B.A. in history from McGill University and an M.A. in English from George Mason University. Her work has appeared in publications as diverse as The Washington Post and The Mountain Spirit, magazine of the Christian Appalachian Project. A former community outreach worker in Appalachia, Ms. Connelly lives with her husband in Charlottesville, Virginia.

