Senior service projects transcend social isolation, pandemic

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The long-standing tradition of Catholic school students performing service projects as their school year draws to a close may have been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, but resourceful seniors and their teachers didn’t let current circumstances change that expression of faith.

“We had to adjust to activities the students could do from the safety of their homes,” said Dina Fischetti, coordinator of Christian service in Donovan Catholic High School, Toms River. “Some of these kids were in full isolation but wanted to know they could make a difference.”

One outreach that gained momentum was the exchange of handwritten cards and letters. Donovan Catholic’s performing arts club, a mix of seniors and younger, hosted a luncheon for 110 local veterans last November. Realizing the servicemen and women could use another boost, they sent each a card or letter of appreciation.

Farther from home, seniors also pen-paled with Ugandan students, working with the Yamba Uganda nonprofit in Toms River.

“What is remarkable are the things they are saying,” Fischetti revealed. “In addition to written letters, the [Donovan Catholic] students are sending paintings, drawings and poems. One student shared a family recipe and asked the Ugandan student to do the same. The kids are enjoying making connections. They are real and personal.”

A group of Villa Victoria Academy graduates, meanwhile, brightened up the lives of area senior citizens with their “#MyDearFriend” campaign. The 20 girls in the Ewing school’s “Glamour Girls” chapter, once dedicated to giving the elderly makeup and manicures, focused their talents on letter-writing during this time of social distancing.

“During the pandemic, we all feel powerless and isolated,” said graduating senior and chapter president Skyler Kellers. “It must be worse for seniors in nursing homes.”

She contacted the administration of Preferred Care at Mercer, Ewing, and Hamilton Continuing Care Center, Hamilton, and learned upward of 110 residents could benefit from a kind word or two.

“I told them that I missed them, I was thinking of them and that we will visit them as soon as possible,” said Kellers, who plans to attend Cabrini University in Radnor, Pa., in the fall and start a chapter there.

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Annmarie Donachie
Holy Cross Preparatory Academy, Delran
The coronavirus also did not prevent the 33 graduating eighth-graders in Holy Cross Academy from partaking in one of its time-honored service projects – expressing gratitude to their parents for their Catholic education.

William Keegan, who entered Holy Cross as a kindergartner and will attend Christian Brothers Academy, Lincroft, on a partial academic scholarship, wrote, “I have learned so much at Holy Cross, from tying my shoes to dissecting a frog. If it wasn’t for you … I wouldn’t be the young man I grew up to be … You gave me the courage to try new things and taught me what is right and what is wrong.”

In Delran, senior Annmarie Donachie and her fellow Holy Cross Preparatory Academy graduates took their high school’s declaration that “service to others is a cornerstone of the faith-based education that we provide.”

Donachie, the school’s National Honor Society president, participated with her classmates in numerous service activities, including sandwich-making and delivery to Camden’s Cathedral Kitchen, creating a video thanking local first-responders, and utilizing the school’s new 3D printer to create personal protective equipment intended for workers at Temple Health, Philadelphia.

“When our second blood drive of the year was canceled,” Donachie explained, “we decided to hold a canned food drive instead. We set up bins in the school’s carport and staged times for students to drop off food, then brought it over to the St. Vincent de Paul Society Food Pantry in Burlington.”

The senior, who is headed to The Catholic University of America, Washington, is matter-of-fact about the good works she and other Lancers have performed at Holy Cross Prep Academy. She explained, “We are the future generation who will run the world. We have to be used to helping others.”

Mater Dei Prep senior Christopher Pfirrman aided both his birth and faith families during the pandemic, assisting his parish, St. Mary, Middletown, by altar serving during Holy Week and livestreamed Sunday Masses.

“I also reached out to my grandparents often to check on them and to lift their spirits, and connected often with my friends virtually [to] talk and support each other,” he said.

Pfirrman, bound for Steubenville, Ohio, to attend Franciscan University in the fall, continued, “My faith in God has helped me during this difficult time. My senior year was taken by the coronavirus, but I am happy everyone I know is healthy.”

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