

# Service Trip an Eye Opener for 8th Graders

By Ramona Tausz

Many eighth-graders take a class trip before they graduate from middle school—maybe to Washington, D.C., or their state capitol—but the students at Immanuel Lutheran School in Palatine, Illinois, have a slightly different experience.

Instead of a fun-focused or educational class excursion, these students take a multi-day mission trip to a low-income community, where they learn the value of discipleship and service to others.

“Since our kids are mostly from the northwest suburbs, this trip gives them a view of an entirely different part of the country and lifestyle that is very valuable for them,” sixth-grade history and religion teacher Dave Saunders, who has led the trip for the past 13 years, said. “It takes them

out of the world of one Lutheran school and puts them into the context of other Christians.”

Their end-of-year service trip tradition started 14 years ago. In the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks, some Immanuel parents were concerned about sending their children on the customary class trip to Washington, D.C.

A mission trip to West Virginia, in conjunction with an organization called World Servants (a branch of World Vision), was organized instead. Ever since, a service event to a low-income American community (either in West Virginia or Kentucky) has been a staple of the Immanuel eighth-graders’ year.

World Servants manages the logistics of setting up a short-term mission trip and puts Immanuel in contact with those who need help. For the first 11 years, the eighth graders served

in Phillippi, West Virginia, a town in the second-poorest county in that state. For the last two years, they’ve served in Wheelwright, Kentucky.

Both of these communities were former coal-mining communities that now have high unemployment rates. When the coal-mining industry changed, the “lifeboat of the community” was gone, Saunders said, and most of these people found themselves out of work.

“We’ve been in houses where you can see sunlight coming in from holes in the roof that aren’t patched,” Saunders said. “People are still heating with coal or wood stoves in some of these places.”

In both West Virginia and Kentucky, the students spend time helping either churches or families with individual repair work: projects like painting houses, building porches, or pouring concrete for a community center. This past year, the students helped erect an entire playground in Wheelwright.

“I sometimes call it ‘Habitat for Humanity for kids,’” Saunders said. He described one house in Phillippi, with 13 people living in it, that had a roof that literally moved as if it was about to collapse. Over the course of 3-4 years of making the mission trip to Phillippi, the house was rebuilt.

The eighth-graders make a real difference in the lives of the people they serve while on this service trip. Saunders described one of the 13 people who lived in the Phillippi house: a little girl of about 3 or 4 who had recently arrived from Pennsylvania and whose parents were unable to take care of her.

“When we arrived she was sitting on the porch totally confused, with a sad look on her face,” Saunders said. “But one of



Palatine eighth graders begin construction on a playground in Wheelwright, Kentucky.

our girls, who was really good with kids, kind of adopted her. A couple days after that, the little one was walking around with her and riding on her shoulders, smiling and happy, while the rest of the team was working.”

Before the trip, Saunders takes time to talk to the kids about the experience, reminding them that although they will have fun, the trip is not a vacation and that their mindset should be one of service.

When they return, he takes time to have an in-class discussion about what they found most significant during the trip. After 14 years of leading the students,

he says he’s found that for most of the students the mission is a very good experience and a “life-changer” for many of them.

“I had one girl who had to be dragged back onto the bus because she just wanted to stay and keep working on a house we were building!” Saunders said with a laugh.

“Many of them have a deep experience where they realize they are serving in a meaningful way,” Saunders said. “They can actually do something and see the results of what they’re doing. A lot of people have a tendency to serve God by serving others, and I think this awakens a lot of the kids up to that possibility.”



## Garden Serves Community

Gardeners from Immanuel Lutheran Church and School in Hillside, Illinois, give back to their community by donating their fresh produce weekly for area food pantries. The produce is raised on individual plots in their permaculture-designed Old Schoolhouse Gardens, on their church’s property fronting Cermak (22nd Street) just west of Wolf Road, near the NID office. By mid-July, early in the harvest season, 60 pounds of produce were going weekly to the Westchester Food Pantry. A special event they hosted on July 29 brought Cook County 4H students, ages 9-12, to the gardens to learn about permaculture (a type of low impact gardening) and how everyone can produce with purpose and give back through gardening. Learn more about the garden on the Old Schoolhouse Community Garden page on Facebook.