

YOUTH GROUP WORKS IN D.C. SOUP KITCHENS OVER SCHOOL BREAK

Seventeen youngsters from Wilton Presbyterian Church and St. Matthew's Episcopal Church traveled to Washington D.C. for five days over their winter break to work in local soup kitchens, specifically the D.C. Central Kitchen, So Others Might Eat (S.O.M.E.), and Martha's Table. They also worked at the Capital Area Food Bank. The group was accompanied by four chaperones including Rev. David Graybill, pastor of Wilton Presbyterian Church, and Rev. Jane Field, Youth and Children's Activities Director at the Presbyterian Church and coordinator of the project.

At S.O.M.E., the young people worked both breakfast and lunch. They set up the dining room, served the meals, and cleaned up after. The work of the D.C. Central Kitchen includes accepting food donations from local restaurants and stores, preparing them for consumption, and storing them until the meals are ready to be delivered to one of the food kitchens in the D.C. area. Women and children, often victims of abuse, frequently choose to go to Martha's Table for their meals, which is staffed totally by women.

This was the 14th annual mission trip that the Senior Highs from these two Wilton churches have taken to Washington. They stayed at the Church of the Pilgrims in their "Pilgrimage" facility. The church's basement has been converted into a youth hostel with bunk rooms, a meeting and lounge area, a kitchen, bathrooms and a laundry. The staff from the Pilgrimage arranged the group's work assignments. The young people cooked their own breakfasts and dinners and ate lunch at the job site.

Although many hours were spent working, there was time for some extras. Members of Senator Christopher Dodd's staff gave the youngsters a tour of the Capitol building. And the group hosted, at dinner, three representatives from the National Coalition for the Homeless -- an advocacy group made up of homeless. They also eeked out a little extra time to visit monuments as well as go ice skating and to the movies.

This is the third year that junior Peter Kempson, a member of St. Matthew's, participated in the trip. Not only did he go because it's fun, but he likes the experience of getting outside the Wilton "bubble" and seeing how the rest of the world works. Spending time with the homeless has made him realize how blessed and lucky he is. He no longer takes such things for granted. When asked if this experience has changed him, he responded, "I would like to think so."

David Garland, a member of Wilton Presbyterian, also a junior on his third mission trip to D.C., agreed with Peter. He enjoys the community service and has benefited from getting to know some of the homeless. They are real people, says David, many with insurmountable problems or bad life breaks. Lots of them are more intelligent and better educated than he would have thought. He especially mentioned a man who wrote beautiful poetry. Many do express hope for their future as they look for jobs.

The youngsters all reflected on this being an eye-opening experience for them on many levels. They agreed it made them realize how lucky they are and how important it is to give back.