

Catholic School in Canton sets its Charitable Mission to Assist Namesake Soup Kitchen and Food Pantry

Situated in the quiet, tree-lined streets of Canton, Michigan, just west of the intersection of Beck on Warren Road, there is a Catholic school, its hallways buzzing with students adorned in neat uniforms. Opened in 1997, All Saints Catholic School has about 580 students in preschool through eighth grade, the fruit of a joint effort between four neighborhood parishes - St. Thomas a'Becket, St. John Neumann, Resurrection, and St. Kenneth.



Teacher Jessica Geyer with some of her third grade students at All Saints School in Canton.

Just a half an hour away, in southeast Detroit's Delray neighborhood just off I-75 at the corner of Fort and Springwells, is a parish school that closed many years ago. Next to the empty school sits the parish church, quiet save for Saturday evenings and Sundays when Mass is celebrated. On weekdays in the basement below, volunteers ready to open the doors to a daily gathering of hungry local neighborhood residents, donned in not-so-neat but functional clothing to protect them from the weather. This is the All Saints Soup Kitchen and Food Pantry (ASSKFP) that, coincidentally, shares the same name as the suburban school to the northeast in Canton.

In March 2016, All Saints School raised \$7,580.78 for the soup kitchen and food pantry.

Since the teachers, students, and parents at All Saints School learned of the existence of ASSKFP about five years ago, they've made the most of their kinship. An All Saints teacher mentioned the soup kitchen and food pantry in southwest Detroit during a meeting of the School's Catholic Identity Committee, and ASSKFP was promptly adopted by the school as their special charity.

"We have the same name, and we were very interested in a positive relationship and in supporting them," said Jessica Geyer, a third grader teacher at the school for the past seven years.

Until recently, Geyer served as chair of the Identity Committee, overseeing most of the school's fundraisers and donation drives. The committee determines school service projects, organizing appropriate activities for seasons throughout the liturgical year. She said the committee has been organizing fundraising events for several years supervised by different teachers.

"We try to support the food pantry in any way we can," she said. "During Catholic Schools Week, we had a day where the kids brought in a can of soup for the pantry and we were able to gather about 400 cans."

The first time the school sponsored a food drive for ASSKFP, students brought in nonperishable food items to stuff into grocery carts. "The carts were all filled, lining the walls of the entire gym," said Geyer. "It was an amazing sight."

Since then, the school holds events for students at different times during the year to raise funds. "Our committee is really a group effort of teachers throughout the school," Geyer explained. "We work together to find a common goal reachable for all the students and something everybody can be involved in."

"We have done different activities to drum up excitement," she explained. "Penny Wars is always popular. We put big five gallon buckets for each grade in the main hallway and then every day, the students go down and put their change in the buckets."

The pennies collected add to a grade's total, while coins collected of other values are subtracted from the total. "The

kids will put their nickels and the dimes, for example, into the eighth graders bin so they lose points." The grade with the highest total gets some sort of prize in the end, like an ice cream social or a pizza party. In March 2016, All Saints School raised \$7,580.78 for the soup kitchen and food pantry.

"The students get really excited when there is some sort of a competition," said Geyer.

Another favorite was the staff versus student challenge in 2015. "We met our fundraising goal so the staff had to dress in a school uniform while the students enjoyed an out of uniform day," Geyer said. "It was a lot of fun."

A visual motivator for the students and their parents has been a thermometer sign posted outside the main school office which shows how close students are to reaching a particular fundraising goal.

"We always try to put what we have collected on display so they can see it," Geyer said. "The thermometer has been a good visual."

A 2015 fundraiser netted more than \$2,775. Geyer delivered the check to David Allen, program director of the ASSKFP. "He said something along the lines of, 'Now I can pay the utility bill,'" she remembers. "At the time, I thought the amount wasn't all that much, but it was touching to see Dave's reaction."

Besides fundraisers and food drives, the Canton All Saints students have collected school supplies to give to kids who visit ASSKFP. "We sent out a note at the beginning of the year



Geyer served as chair of the school Identity Committee which oversees most of the fundraisers and donation drives.

when parents were shopping for school supplies anyway," said Geyer. "Places like OfficeMax usually have notebooks on sale and we suggested to our parents to buy a couple extra. We then delivered them to the food pantry and they were able to distribute them. The parish told us they also used some of the glue sticks, crayons, and notebooks for their Religious Education program."

Annually, the school also sponsors a Christmas Giving Tree campaign during Advent to collect gifts for children from low income families at All Saints Parish.

"Our Advent Giving Tree is the service project we do every year," said Geyer. "This past year we had a group of eighth graders go down and help deliver the gifts. It was a very powerful experience for them. They were able to go in and meet the volunteers that work there, as well as visit with some of the people who get food from the soup kitchen. We are hoping to send more groups down in the future. It's good for the students to see this place only a half hour away where people are so in need."

The All Saints Soup Kitchen and Food Pantry is a ministry of Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan. To donate a monetary gift to the ASSKFP, visit ccsem.org and click on the donate link, making sure to designate your donation for All Saints. You can also mail your donation directly to ASSKFP at 7824 W Fort Street, Detroit, MI 48209-2702. To donate food to the soup kitchen or food pantry, contact program manager David Allen at 855-882-2736, ext. 1 or email: allend@ccsem.org.