

FRANCISCAN CORE

YOUTH LEADERS SERVING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ST. FRANCIS

Embracing its Franciscan heritage, Viterbo University in La Crosse felt a call to extend its outreach by engaging high school youth in its unique founding mission of Catholic social teaching and the values of St. Francis, offering them an experience to become leaders for the Church and the world. To help fund this undertaking, Viterbo was invited to prepare a proposal for the Lilly Endowment grant supporting theology institutes for high school youth. They were awarded \$134,570 to fund their efforts and to make the experience a reality for our diocesan youth.

Story by
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“Franciscan CORE” was chosen as the name for Viterbo’s summer immersion program held on campus each June. Since its inauguration in 2017, a group of high school students, college mentors and their leaders have come together to walk

in the footsteps of St. Francis and St. Clare, learning to recognize and respond to social justice issues through action and contemplation.

Viterbo’s unique program is a partnership of campus ministry and the departments of religious studies and philosophy. It also finds

support from the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration (FSPA), Catholic Charities of La Crosse and the diocesan Office for Youth and Young Adult Ministry. “The collaboration of these entities has been very important in the success of the program. The roles continually change, but the support of each is vital,” explains the CORE program director, Emily Dykman.

“C.O.R.E.” stands for: Compassion for those on the margins, Outreach for those in need, Reflection on God’s call and Experience of community and service. These

CORE values are the focus of the week’s schedule that includes daily prayer, intentional learning with leaders in the field, direct service and plenty of time to process the experiences.

“What does this actually look like?” you might ask. Each day begins with breakfast and morning prayer with reflection, offered by the college-aged mentors, that begin to focus on the theme for the day. Next, pilgrims (which CORE participants are aptly called) attend a talk by a faculty member of the religious studies and theology departments on the day’s Catholic social teaching theme. Some of the themes include human dignity, options for the poor, solidarity and care of creation.

Lunch follows, and, afterward, a service opportunity. When pilgrims return to campus, they are presented with a reflection on some component of the life of St. Francis that corresponds with the day’s theme and some free time. After dinner, pilgrims participate in an evening activity, ranging from games to movies or a hike on the bluff. The day ends with reflection and closing prayer



that offers participants a chance to process—through journaling and small group discussion—what they’ve experienced throughout the day.

In addition to these activities, participants celebrate daily Mass. They have a reserved space in the San Damiano Chapel that is available throughout the day for quiet prayer and reflection. Last summer, a period of eucharistic adoration was introduced to the schedule and was very well-received. “I have become convinced that our work, as leaders, is to provide opportunities for the pilgrims to meet God and one another in unique and real ways,” Emily shares, as she is always looking to strengthen and improve the experience. “We follow the pattern of St. Francis as we attempt to seek a balance between contemplation and action. The two inform one another.”

Engaging with a variety of La Crosse-area service organizations, pilgrims participate in unique field-work opportunities each day. Some of the past sites have been Aptiv, Hunger Task Force, Salvation Army, Wafer, Place of Grace Catholic Worker, Catholic Charities Warming Center, Habitat for Humanity, Villa St. Joseph assisted living and community and convent gardens.

“In each of these experiences, students learn a little about the organization and what services they offer the community. We try to spend about two hours at the site (usually as a small group) offering whatever service is needed. In some places, there is a specific service project; in others, it is being present to or spending time with those who come to the site,” Emily explains.

Samuel Gallagher, of Evansville and member of St. Philip Parish in

+ *INTERESTED IN BECOMING A PART OF THE CORE FAMILY?*

If you or a young adult in your life is a rising 10th, 11th or 12th grade student who is interested in learning more about Catholic social teaching and actively serving the community, we’d love to have you join us! This summer, Franciscan CORE week will be held **JUNE 14-19** at Viterbo University in La Crosse, where the residence halls will become your home for the week. Cost is \$375, which covers room and board. Scholarships are available to those who may need financial assistance. For more information or to register, visit viterbo.edu/franciscan-core or contact CORE Director Emily Dykman at eadykman@viterbo.edu

Rolling Ground, was a 2019 CORE pilgrim. “My favorite place [for service] was the Boys and Girls Club, where I played with the children. We played board games like chess and Sorry and built with Lego bricks. I enjoy being around kids and having fun with them.”

Pilgrims Helen Carstens, of Soldiers Grove and member of St. Philip Parish in Rolling Ground, and Ellie Groth, of West Salem and member of St. Leo Parish, enjoyed their service time outdoors in the gardens. “I enjoyed getting my hands dirty in the earth while being there with nature and God,” says Ellie. “It was a very peaceful time because I could hear the animals and bugs in the nearby woods and I could easily clear my mind.”

“One of my most significant experiences was my stay at the homeless shelter,” says Samuel. “We were not told about this ahead of time and were given the experience

of entering the shelter as if we were homeless. We walked to the shelter and were given a number while we waited in the hallway to be checked in. Once my number was called, I was given a chair to sleep in for the night. We had dinner and then tried our best to sleep in the chair. This experience gave me a slight idea of what a homeless person goes through to find shelter. The experience taught me to be more aware of the needs of others in my community and beyond.”

“After attending CORE, I realized that my Faith can become stronger by helping others,” said Helen. “I need to always be aware of those around me with greater needs.”

All pilgrims agree that the week-long experience leads them to become part of the “CORE family,” a group that grows close through service, conversation and prayer.

“The community that forms and continues to develop after the CORE experience supports and encourages one another in their life of Faith,” Emily eagerly shares. “I have been overwhelmed by the participation of both the high school and college-aged students. They give me great hope for the future of our Church and world by their faithful witness. The thoughtfulness and care they extend to one another and to those whom they serve is truly inspiring for me.” †

“WE SOUGHT TO BUILD A PROGRAM THAT WOULD ENGAGE A COMMUNITY BEYOND VITERBO WITH THE HOPE OF BRINGING OUR INSTITUTIONAL VALUES INTO THE WORLD.”

EMILY DYKMAN, PROGRAM DIRECTOR OF FRANCISCAN CORE



1. Helen Carstens serves God’s creation through a simple act of gardening.

2. As foundational as service is to the CORE experience, encountering God and one another is equally so. Together the 2019 CORE Family hiked up Grandad Bluff as one of their team-building adventures.

3. “The experience taught me to be more aware of the needs of others in my community and beyond,” says Sam Gallagher (L) of his CORE experience.