

CATHOLIC VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL IS FAMILY MISSION



Melissa Kaiser, left, Margaret Windle and Maryalice Beach pose with the Catholic Kidz Camp vacation Bible school programs created by this family of women.

FORT WAYNE — Sign up for Vacation Bible School is currently underway in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend with parishes preparing to host a fun and faith-filled week for their young students. Traditionally, Catholic parishes have implemented derivatives of Protestant VBS programs simply because there have been few Catholic alternatives. However, a local family of faith-filled and creative women has changed all that.

After a discussion with a neighbor in 2001 about the lack of available Catholic programs for VBS, St. Vincent de Paul parishioner and mom of seven children Melissa Kaiser took the challenge. She gathered her mother, Margaret Windle, and sisters Maryalice Beach and Susan Lawson and began brainstorming ideas for a fully Catholic VBS program. With the decision to begin with teachings on the Trinity, the idea for “Saint Patrick and the Holy Trinity Catholic VBS” program was born. The women were soon developing lesson plans that incorporated the sacraments, Catholic values and virtues, Scripture and stories of saints for grades kindergarten through sixth grade.

By 2004, Our Lady of the Hills Parish in South Carolina, where Lawson resides, was piloting the first program with great success. And the program grew in popularity across the country. Since then this family of catechists has developed five programs, all of which have the bishop’s imprimatur, an official approval on the content that is in line with Catholic teachings.

Each of the five easy-to-use, pull-and-go programs is organized in a five-day thematic format. Each program incorporates a book written on a specific saint to study, and concludes with evangelization and a call to discipleship and service on the final day.

Engaging music, created by St. Vincent de Paul music teacher Nate Proulx, along with creative crafts, activities, Bible stories, skits and games inspire the students to participate more fully in their faith formation. The Catholic Kidz Camp programs are the first Catholic VBS programs to incorporate Eucharistic Adoration.

Though the faith lessons are founded in the Bible and sacred Tradition, the Catholic Kidz Camp programs are fun and energizing, says Beach, second-grade teacher at St. Vincent de Paul School in Fort Wayne. She adds, “We have to present and teach material through the eyes of a child, with active participation.” And she adds with enthusiasm, “Catholics can be fun. And we’re here to prove that!”

The team has placed a grand emphasis on details in these themed programs, including décor and props. Clever snacks such as Fig Newton Bible, St. Jerome Cone and St. Peter’s Big Toe Sandals carry the theme into break time with easy

to follow directions. Their website www.growingwiththesaints.com even has a page that encourages current VBS personnel to share ideas that might enhance each program.

The colorful and inspiring paperback books on the saints are written by the family's matriarch, Margaret Windle. As author, mother of eight and grandmother of 36, Windle says she has always relied on the saints to help her through difficult situations in life. She says, "I always turned to God and the saints when there was a problem. They were always solved through the saints." She inspired her own children to look to the saints for guidance by telling stories of the lives of saints in their youth. Currently, she writes lives of the saints' stories for her grandchildren as birthday gifts to keep that Catholic treasure trove alive in her family. She says of the VBS programs, "I hope these will turn children to the saints and know how powerful their prayers are. Through reading about the saints they will become saints."

Her children agree when daughter Melissa Kaiser says of Windle, "She's been an incredible example for us. She's a living saint!"

The Catholic Kidz Camp program themes reference the rich tradition and history of the Catholic faith and offer specific messages. The second program "Assorted Saints and the Virtues of Faith, Hope and Love," offers information on diversity and the roll of angels in lives and in salvation history, while "Parade-Around the Our Father with St. Joseph of Cupertino," encourages vocations. Other programs include " Parachute with the Angels and St. Catherine LaBoure," and the most recent, titled, "The Vatican Express," which offers the five-day theme of traveling to the Vatican and learning about the papacy. It includes a music CD and a delightful and informative DVD with photos and narrative on the highlights of the Vatican.

St. Vincent de Paul Parish, Fort Wayne, VBS directors Gina Harman and Kristy Cirillo are excited about facilitating a Catholic Kidz Camp program for the second year at their church. Harman says feedback on last year's program that focused on the saints was encouraging and they are enthusiastic about the new "Vatican Express" program for this year.

"The organization of the program is incredible. It's laid out so perfectly," reports Harman, adding, "The program is conducive to each age group and it doesn't just end at the end of the week. The kids take away so much and carry it over into the school year."

Diane Ort, director of the vacation bible school at St. Joseph in Garrett, says, "Last year we did the 'Parade Around the Our Father VBS' and we enjoyed the program and the great service we received. We have been choosing Catholic VBS programs for our church, so that the children will learn all of the beautiful riches of our faith including the sacraments, saints and the Eucharist."

The Catholic Kidz Camp programs are so versatile that they appeal to several venues outside of the intended VBS summer program. Many religious education teachers, as well as regular education teachers use these programs as supplements to their catechesis. The programs have even been used during retreats for children. And, says Beach, the programs never become obsolete. "They can go through the cycle and just start over," she reports.

Currently there are 40 parishes in Indiana that use Catholic Kidz Camp programs as well as parishes in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, California and Texas. This family of women who believed they could make a difference feel blessed to be creating programs that are planting seeds of faith in the hearts of diocesan youth. They agree, "The Holy Spirit is guiding us and we believe we were brought together to create faith programs to help kids' faith grow. And we have grown closer in the process."

For more information on Catholic Kidz Camp programs visit www.growingwiththesaints.com.

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