Creating a sacred space: teenagers on retreat
Engaging teenagers, embodying the gospel in new ways, touching the heart, not just sitting-listening all the time, getting involved, standing still, entering into silence — all this and more takes place during a Golden Rule high school retreat at Scarboro Missions.

Notre Dame Associate Kathy Murtha and Lay Spiritan Kate Marshall Flaherty animate these special days. Kate explains their importance. “Jesus took his forty days in the desert, the Buddha meditated — in all faith traditions there’s this “removal” in order to be still. A retreat is like a day in the desert — pulling us out of all that keeps us in competition with others and with ourselves in the course of daily living.”

Creating a sacred space

Kathy looks back. “When I started giving retreats I had a lot to learn. The students were my best teachers — you just had to look at their faces to see whether they were with you or not.

“I thought a retreat would be me doing the talking, giving a lot of information. That was the system — the academic theology school system — I was coming from.

“I needed to create sacred experiences for them, where I was more the holder of the environment and less the person doing it all. I needed to create a space, a sacred space.”

Kate chimes in. “In that space learning occurs: not just through words, but through prayer and meditation and process and fun and laughter. You have to break it down into these activities before anything can happen on the spiritual level.”

Kathy believes her main role in retreat work is to introduce teenagers to their inner life. “They have an inner life where...”
they can begin to get in touch with the indwelling divine presence. That is absolutely radical. The world around them is so outer directed. So is the school system: ‘What’s the agenda? When are we finished? Let’s get to the point.’ Even the church, at times, is so outer directed. The most radical thing is to get them to think that they can live inner directed. That’s been a real change for me.”

Hungry for meditation
Kate, mother of three teenagers, recalls her own assumptions. “I was amazed to see how hungry the students were for meditation. I had assumed my biggest challenge would be to get them to lie down, be quiet and suffer through a meditation, hoping they might really enjoy it. I assumed some would and some might not. But, from the very beginning, on every evaluation, it was the part they said they really loved. That taught me that young people are hungry to be filled, hungry to get out of their head and into their heart, hungry to have that quiet.

“Having been a drama teacher I thought the fun and the games, the embodiment of the Golden Rule, the skits, the scavenger hunt, the multimedia would turn them on. They do enjoy all these, but they always say the best part of the retreat is the meditation. I find that affirming, exciting and surprising.

Our true self is in our heart
“At the beginning of the day I say, ‘Close your eyes and point to yourself.’ One or two point to their mouths: ‘We’re all about who we say we are.’ You’d imagine everyone would point to their head: ‘We are who we think we are. We think we’re hot tempered or good at English or bad at Math, we need to lose five pounds.’ But I say to them, ‘Where did you all point?’ ‘Our heart!’ ‘How is it we all know that our true self is in our heart and not in...
our head?’ ‘Oh, that’s where we love, Miss. That’s where Jesus lives, Miss’.

“I just didn’t think they’d consider the place they pointed to as where the divine light resides. At the meditation they get a chance to get out of their head and go into a place of stillness. Often they’ll say, ‘Could you do that again? Could you do that again?’

“Our meditation takes different forms. When we talk about sexuality we often talk about going into the heart and out of the head. When we talk about World Religions we talk about the breath being the manifestation of the spirit in every faith. When we talk about leadership we talk about loving ourselves in order to love the world, forgiving ourselves in order to forgive the world, treating ourselves with compassion in order to understand the world.”

Resting in the arms of God

Kathy finds that this meditation is new for most of them. “So we do some visual-
other than winners and losers? One where we’re all winners? Let’s say this team had the best song, that team had the best rap, this team had the best costumes.”

Both retreat leaders are adamant that the first thing is to have juice, cookies and hot chocolate ready for the students when they arrive. Feeding their bodies is absolutely important — up to half of them arrive not having had breakfast.

Sometimes the teachers ask them to get rid of this and the games and “get right to the point”. But the point of a retreat is the students themselves. The kids are the point. They often say, “I got to know my classmates better in a day than I did all year” or “You know, we need some of this every day” or “This gives me a whole new lease on life.”

Scarborough Bluffs

An after-lunch activity is a walk to the Scarborough Bluffs. The students have never seen these Bluffs although many might live only a couple of kilometres from them. They don’t know they’re looking at Lake Ontario. “I tell them, ‘Welcome to the Atlantic Ocean!’” says Kathy. Kate adds, “Just today a couple of the Neil McNeil kids said, ‘Wow, if I had enough money I’d build a cabin right here. What a great view.’ A simple thing like walking in nature to the Bluffs really touches them. And once again, we ask them to be still.”

Kathy voices a concern. “I fear for the future of our ministry here. Will there be time and money for this valuable educational experience? The teachers who really value what we’re doing here cut corners to make it happen. But some schools don’t see its value. It’s not on the curriculum — therefore it’s not valuable. The chaplains have a hard time keeping it alive. Retreat facilitators have a really hard time making a living from such days.”

Kate agrees. “You’re fighting against a mentality that says, ‘This is a waste of time.’ So, you’re fighting against a lot to be able to do days like this, to introduce students to the interior world.”

If, as some psychologists claim, 15 year olds experience an intellectual spiritual surge, it is important that they find a welcoming safe place to explore their own questions and longings. Both retreat animators are of one mind — it would be a shame not to be there for the young at that critical time.

The Golden Rule Movie

Rev. Terry Weller, Christian Interfaith Minister

H
istorians tell us that between the ninth and second centuries B.C.E. a new concept for living came into the consciousness of humans. Its focal point is commonly known as the Golden Rule.

Almost a decade ago Paul McKenna, head of the Interfaith desk at Scarboro Missions, published his Golden Rule Poster. It is a brightly coloured poster of yellow and blue, featuring symbols of 13 different world religions. Beside each symbol is written that religion’s version of the Golden Rule. The Christian version is: “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

The poster was like a dove released into the wind. Taking on a life of its own it travelled around the world. It graces a wall in the United Nations building, has a home in the Vatican, hangs in different places of worship on every continent, speaks to visitors of town and city halls, and beckons to students in the corridors of their schools. The poster’s travelogue is endless.

Animating the Golden Rule

On Sunday, February 22, 2009, the Golden Rule Poster came to another major milestone. Funded in part by the Spiritans, a new film, Animating the Golden Rule, produced by Tina Petrova, a Toronto film producer, was previewed to a select audience at Scarboro Missions. In the film, Petrova presents a group of Catholic high school students on a Golden Rule retreat at Scarboro Missions. The group is divided into smaller groups and each team is assigned one of the thirteen religions. Their team assignment is to take the Golden Rule, as it is stated within their assigned religion, and prepare a theatrical skit, a musical demonstration, a poetic expression, a song, a rap or any creative process to demonstrate that version of the Golden Rule.

The film shows clips of many of the presentations. At one point, a team of students swirled into dance to the words of the Golden Rule. Later a stage drama moves from chaos to a meditative stance. Drums beat an entrance for a young man with a sonorous voice at a podium speaking the words of the Rule. Actors become bugs playing on the road; threatened by cars they are saved by Jayne the Jain proclaiming that nothing will die on her watch! Another acting troupe portrays a young woman who does not care for the life of insects until a spiritual being changes her into a bug who does not enjoy her fate.

As the Golden Rule is portrayed and sung, guitars and bongos resound to the themes. And most of all, the entire group of teenagers rejoice in the ancient ethic, willingly embracing it as theirs. Joyfully they pass it to others through their creative talents. Collectively they demonstrate in microcosm the potential effect of this global ethic on the entire human family.

Afterwards, students discuss what they learned personally from the experience about themselves and about each other. They share their newfound understanding about how the Golden Rule can change the world. The exercise captured so well by Petrova and her crew shows us two basic truths about the Golden Rule: its power lies in the doing — not in the knowing; and its expression springs from our collective global consciousness.

For information re DVD Animating the Golden Rule contact:
Scarboro Missions 416-261-7135 or www.thegoldenrulemovie.com