

Youth from diocese honored for faith-based service in online ceremony

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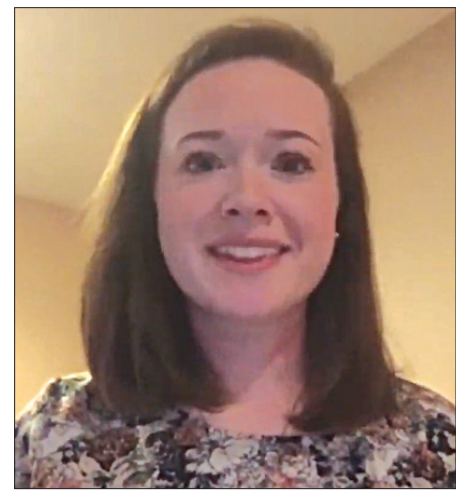
While the pandemic may have disrupted many events, some organizations continued their outreach in maintaining treasured annual celebrations and traditions. Such was the case for the Diocese of Metuchen's conferring of the St. Timothy and St. Teresa of Calcutta awards last month to teens from 24 parishes.

Turning to a virtual platform, the diocesan Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministry honored 34 outstanding high schoolers for their faith-based service projects in a livestreamed ceremony Jan. 26 — appropriately the feast day of St. Timothy.

"I never really imagined or thought about getting anything back for my service," wrote honoree Evanjaline Sahaya in an e-mail. "But that I was nominated told me that my service was felt by those around me. This made me really, really happy. I was so glad that I could use my talents to make a difference in my parish community, especially now during the pandemic."

The recipients of the awards were lauded online by Bishop James F. Checchio and video host Megan Vantslot, the office's director, during the half-hour broadcast on Facebook and YouTube. Vantslot's upbeat introductions of the winners, with "Flight of the Inner Bird" playing throughout the presentation, struck the right tone for this spirited, and spirit-filled, recognition event.

"Certainly, this year is different, but what remained the same is the cre-



In screenshots from left, Bishop James F. Checchio gives opening remarks of the St. Timothy and St. Teresa of Calcutta awards, which was hosted by Megan Vantslot, right, director, diocesan Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministry. The annual ceremony was livestreamed because of the coronavirus pandemic.

ative way that you expressed the faith you have in your hearts," Bishop Checchio said in his remarks to the awardees watching online. "So many went to extraordinary extremes to reach to those in need during this pandemic."

Creative Courage, this year's theme, was evident in all of the caring displays of Christ-like voluntarism by the recipients. Pope Francis' recent "Patris Corde" Apostolic Letter on the 150th Anniversary of the proclamation of St. Joseph underscores the awards' theme: In the face of difficulty, we can

either give up and walk away, or somehow engage with it. At times, difficulties bring out resources we did not even think we had.

"I hope my actions and service, no matter where I am or what I am doing, reflect God's love in some way," wrote honoree Elaina Phillips. "Because of my faith in Jesus Christ, I am continuously trying to reevaluate my choices: what I spend time on, the ideas/concepts I might be influenced by, and the people I connect with. I believe the Holy Spirit is my source of strength; of course the people around me have influence, too."

Awardee Phyllip Gwozdz wrote: "Without my faith and my involvement with Catholic-inspired service and leadership, I would not have been able to receive these awards. My faith plays a huge role in my volunteer work as I believe that I am doing these works through Christ and his inspirational teachings."

Honoree Claire Kirby noted in a pre-recorded video during the virtual presentation how she realized her calling to evangelization through the mission trips and retreats she attended beginning in her freshman year with the youth ministry at St. James Parish, Basking Ridge. On subsequent outings to shelters in New York City and in New Jersey, she felt a connection through short conversations with the homeless.

"The people I served while on these runs opened my eyes to how beautiful God was when serving others," said

Kirby in the video. "Nothing brings me as much happiness as serving others and making them happy. It is my ultimate goal to show and to help others how to let God into your lives and come to the same realizations that I have."

Several of the conferees were recognized with the additional St. Teresa of Calcutta Award as witnesses to their faith for their work with the poor, lowly, sick, and homeless while exhibiting Catholic morals, integrity, service, and leadership. Some examples of the projects they engaged in involved: delivering Thanksgiving meals to the homebound, conducting a hygiene kit drive for the homeless, cleaning church pews, cooking meals for hospital employees, creating virtual morning prayer videos for classmates, and dropping off small faith

gifts to religious education students.

"Every day is a new task or new challenge, and God is needed every step of the way," wrote beneficiary Evan Wooby. "My family is always there to keep me focused and on the right path on my faith journey as I become the best person I can be with the Holy Spirit as my guide."

Streaming the ceremony virtually allowed relatives and friends of the honorees to "attend" the event from near and far. The ceremony can currently be viewed on the diocesan YouTube channel. Last year, the in-person event was held at Saint Joseph High School, Metuchen.

List of Timothy Award winners on next page

Hospital to offer free, virtual diabetes program

NEW BRUNSWICK — Saint Peter's Healthcare System is committed to assisting members of the community prevent or delay the onset of Type 2 diabetes through a free, yearlong program that teaches improved nutrition, increased exercise, stress management and weight loss.

The Prevent T2 program is open to anyone 18 years or older diagnosed with prediabetes or with a history of gestational diabetes. Pre-registration is required.

The next session begins March 3 with all classes meeting virtually on Wednesdays from 7 to 8 p.m. The yearlong program meets every other week for the first six months, followed by monthly meetings in the second half of the year.

For more information or to register, call (732) 339-7772. Space is limited. Classes will be offered in English (and Spanish as needed).

The program recently received the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Prelimi-

nary Recognition, a designation reserved for programs that are effectively delivering a quality, evidence-based program and one that is proven to be advancing toward CDC Full Recognition status. Full Recognition is achieved once individuals have participated in the program for a specific duration of time and exhibit data that reflects the achievement of specific CDC benchmarks.

Taught by registered dietitian nutritionists, Prevent T2 has already shown promising outcomes. This is Saint Peter's fifth session and the current 14 participants have had a collective weight loss of 264 pounds and an increase of 255 minutes per week in physical activity.

Sessions are designed to be both fun and educational. Lifestyle coaches track progress while the group format allows for collegial support that inspires healthier living and a commitment to individual goals.