

A Memoir

of a successful
YOUTH MINISTRY PROGRAM

as written by the
youth of the *Parish of Our Lady of the Snows*
and surrounding community

under the guidance of
Youth and Young Adult Ministry Director,
Mr. Brian J. Williams

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Many Hands Make Light Work

“Many hands make light work.” It is this mantra that has tuned, rehearsed, performed, and sustained the ensemble that is the Youth and Young Adult Ministry program of Our Lady of the Snows. The man on the podium, Mr. Brian J. Williams, like any great conductor, continues to ask and explore meaningful questions in his fresh interpretations and far-reaching endeavors. He has *allowed* for the development of a youth program which provides leadership opportunities, spiritual and intellectual growth, and the strengthening of new and renewed friendships; all of which provide the foundations youth and young adults need to continue to grow, inspire, and be inspired for the rest of their lives. It is truly not an insignificant mission. The *Big Picture* – how success should truly be measured – is not numbers or programs or successes, but the recognition of the challenges we undertake, our motivations, and our openness to change and growth. If these ideals are rooted in positive and faithful teaching, the results are just what we have seen: a thriving Youth and Young Adult Ministry program.

Brian Williams – or more affectionately, B. Wills – will probably read the above paragraph and feel two things. First, he will feel “really good” that the Youth Ministry program of this parish can be recognized from this viewpoint and that its alumni regard and revere it in the same way. Second, his humbling modesty will insist that it was not he who orchestrated such a program, but rather the youth of the community. Well, fortunately, he is not writing these

pages, and we therefore can give him the credit he deserves. Brian Williams is a person people want to be around. He gives all of himself and asks for nothing in return. He has guided me to “live out the Gospel” in my own endeavors. Mr. Williams most definitely practices what he preaches, and is an inspiration to work for and to work with. He has opened the doors of the church for hundreds of students in very inviting and encouraging ways. So, to most accurately relate how such a program came into being, it must be stated flat out and in black and white that the largest contributor was Mr. Brian J. Williams, a wonderful counselor, teacher, mentor, and friend.

It was the morning of August 4th in 2000 when Brian expressed the need for a renewed energy within the youth ministry. We were walking around the grounds of the Church of St. Benedict the morning after the first night of the 8th Annual Parish Bazaar. Brian wondered where all the kids were. Back then, there were a handful of dedicated young parishioners who helped sustain the youth program within the parish. That handful of thirty or forty has since grown to an excess of five-hundred, with hundreds more involved from outside of the parish itself. It can be done, and we will tell you how.

First it must be noted that all programs and communities are different, and the goals and objectives that motivate one group might not necessarily work in a different area or organization. What first needs to be done is to decide upon a general vision of where you want your program to go, what you want to be involved in, and who you will need to help get the ball rolling. For instance, we did not originally have our sights set on numbers totaling well into the hundreds with a multitude of leadership groups and projects. We simply sought a more involved membership. As the youth of the parish, we did not want to let Brian down in this charge. With Brian’s strong leadership, our motivated committee set out to build a great youth ministry program.

Thee Task Force

On that sunny day in early August, a handful of us under the guidance of B. Wills formed a task force that would brainstorm different ways in which to motivate the youth of the parish to become more involved in the church. When Brian first came to Our Lady of the Snows, he possessed great visions, of that I am sure, but he can attest to the short comings of trying to

accomplish a great deal at once as an adult leader in a youth program. I am sure Brian approves of the word choice at the onset of this essay: “He has *allowed* for the development of a youth program...” I have learned from Brian that, especially in a youth organization, as well I am sure with most other organizations, a program director needs to lead and guide, not necessarily direct. Much of what this program has since accomplished has been a vision, design, and facility of the youth of the parish community. When Brian suggested the formation of a task force, it was his vision that he would use his position as youth director in an advisory capacity and allow the *youth* to brainstorm what was needed to inspire the involvement of the *youth* of the Abingtons.

Thee Task Force comprised two students from each high school grade level. Then a junior, I had the privilege to serve on this committee with close friends and students from other grade levels. As a team, we decided we needed to “re-organize” the youth program. We met on a weekly basis and decided that what was needed was a full-size kick-off event to involve as many students from the community and parish as possible – the shock-and-awe theory used for peaceful and productive purposes. We discussed activities we were involved with in the past that had been the most inspirational and most successful. Up to that point, these events were attended by the youth of our program but were organized and facilitated by other community organizations and religious affiliations. At one of those weekly meetings, we decided to host an all-night dance for high school students – a fundraiser that would benefit the Catholic based charity for Haiti called Hands Together. We knew we needed a foundation that would inspire work for a good cause, provide an opportunity to further our faith, and foster continued involvement within the youth of the Abingtons – we call it *N’ap Danse Ansanm*, which in Creole means, “We are dancing together.” The event, along with other various contributions, has since risen over \$17,000 for the people of Haiti.

In taking the all-night team event theme from the American Cancer Society’s *Relay for Life*, we designed a 12-hour all-night dance-off with more food than anyone could possibly consume, great music and dancing, movies, games, prayer, opportunities for awareness of what others have and do not have, and other memorable and poignant events. The remarkable aspect of the event was that it was entirely organized and run by the youth. Granted, there were adult chaperones, but the work was accomplished by high school students. The event planning, accounting, set-up, clean-up, etc... was all accomplished by the youth of the parish of Our Lady of the Snows. It was a tremendous success – one that has led to annual events each year since.

However, it is important to note the Big Picture once again. It is easy to plan an all night party, but more difficult to inspire awareness of poignant world affairs and their relevance to our faith as well as a continued involvement. Brian wanted the youth involved in his program to feel a sense of ownership and respect in working toward relevant and worthwhile goals. We found this in charity work. Collective acts of giving seem to form bonds that are not easily broken.

Community Service and Outreach

We had hit on something. Could it be that we could find greater success in involvement and faith if we worked rather than played? This was something we came to realize. That is not to say that all we do is work, for we know that all work and no play makes Brian a dull boy! After the success of our first annual dance-off charity, the focus of the youth program turned to community service – projects that would allow large groups to live out the Gospel and strengthen the camaraderie of the youth group at the same time.

Projects that don't publicize are those thankless anomalies that foster increased participation. We found that the more we did for others, the more others wanted to join in. This was a gradual process, however. It took a few years to achieve the level of participation and inertia that we have since achieved. It is better to grow a great deal over a longer period of time, rather than all at once. Expect and respect failure; don't try to undertake too much at once. It is crucial to recognize that when one program or project loses its intensity or fizzles out, do not try to revive it. Instead, try something new. Over time, it may be appropriate to revisit successes of the past that have since gone by the way side.

Community service and community outreach are areas that provide meaningful and relevant experiences in faith and growth that will stay with all those involved for years afterward. Ask yourself what you want your youth program to be about. Create a goal, a mantra, or an objective. Once you decide *what* you want your program to accomplish or embody, it is easier to develop and cultivate it. Community outreach and community service are good places to start.

The Youth Ministry program of our parish has since developed many programs of service and outreach. We serve a monthly *Teen Mass* at which teenagers facilitate the mass service. They provide the music, read from scripture, usher all in attendance, take up the gifts and collection, and provide all other needed services for parishioners during mass which otherwise

would have been accommodated by other adults. This project opens doors for the youth to participate more fully in the church and parish community. High school students are also directly involved in the planning of Junior High religious education programs and projects. In this way, they can help ensure that younger students are welcomed into the church community in more successful and enriching ways. Our students even teach and mentor the younger children in religious education classes during Sunday School and over the summer at Bible School. In fact, the high school students of our youth ministry program are exceptionally instrumental in the development of the summer Bible School program. Also within the church, the success of our annual Church Bazaar, one of the largest in the diocese, is largely due to the efforts and industriousness of the youth and young adults under Brian Williams' guidance. Over the years, more and more students contribute to the success of this church picnic. Many hands make light work.

Another suggestion is to look within your own community for other organizations in need of individuals or groups for help. For example, over the past few years we have developed a relationship with our county's American Cancer Society division and taken trips to West Virginia to help build houses for Habitat for Humanity. With their guidance and assistance, we have developed the region's first youth-run American Cancer Society *Relay for Life*. Four years ago, the Cancer Society came to the youth of the Abington Area involved in the youth program of Our Lady of the Snows Parish, and asked for our help in the charge to find a cure for cancer. The reason for the success and diversity of this particular youth program is due in part to Brian Williams, a symbol of the friendship, love, and selflessness that also represent the American Cancer Society and its undying *hope* that one day, because of the efforts of groups like the youth of the Abingtons, we will be able to fund and find a cure for cancer.

The Youth Relay is the largest event of each and every year for the Youth program. After several years of participating in other local relays moved by the loss of one of our own friends to leukemia, the scope of our participation in these events led the American Cancer Society to our front door asking if we would be willing to host a Relay in our area. The youth ministry program, being the principal motivator in the Scranton and Dunmore Relays, was asked to head up the event. This is one of only a handful of completely youth-run Relays in the world.

The youth, supported by mentors from Our Lady of the Snows Parish and the Abington Community have successfully raised over \$165,000 dollars for the cancer society during the past

three years, with a projected goal of an additional \$75,000 in 2005. Our projected fundraising goals for cancer research, education, advocacy, and service programs inspire the current organizers, event chairpersons, and team members to devote twenty-four hours to the cause. Many of these students have devoted most of their free time since the New Year to this event, as well! Over the past three years, the Youth and Young Adult Ministry program of Our Lady of the Snows has raised over a quarter-of-a-million dollars for various charities.

We host the event at a local recreational park with support from the community and school district. Throughout the twenty-four hours, memories are made, and the bonds of friendship are strengthened by the unifying camaraderie the *hope* of a cure inspires. Food and fun are had by all; with live entertainment and activities all “day and night and day!” There are ecumenical services as well as a Catholic mass during the event. Also, at 9:00 PM, a *Luminary* ceremony takes place on the relay track, lined with luminaries in memory and in honor of those who have lost and won the battle of cancer. During this moving time, names of hundreds of survivors and memorials are read aloud as all walk the track together, hand-in-hand, underneath the glistening lights of HOPE. Some 400 high school students come and take part in this *Relay for Life*. It is nothing short of remarkable that all of these students can see the importance of such an event, and such a cause, and come out to take part in its effort.

Be Good to Yourself

This is not to say that a program should not do things for itself “just for fun.” By all means, once you achieve substantial involvement it is so important to pamper yourself! In order to do this, our program frequently hosts and attends religious retreats for rest and relaxation as well as the growth of our minds and hearts. The Our Lady of the Snows Youth Ministry program has provided over thirty retreat opportunities each year for its students. We have held numerous *Leadership Lock-Ins* for training and community. These all day and all night lock-ins provide excellent opportunities for building friendships and learning about leadership and life. We organize indoor rock-climbing events, paint-ball excursions, *busses to nowhere*, Junior High dances, road trips, and cook-outs. We plan yearly weekend ski trips to Vermont and have enjoyed limo rides around town just for fun. The youth group has adopted a highway and washed hundreds of cars at what seems like weekly car washes in the church parking lot to raise

funds for various events. We have taken trips for both business and pleasure to New York City and Washington, D.C. to attend various rallies. Our students truly enjoy the respect and value the church offers them – even when we duck taped Brian to a wall (as a fundraiser)!

For our spiritual growth, each Easter season the students reenact *The Living Way of the Cross*, a live depiction of the Stations of the Cross. The event is held inside the church with a full house of parishioners. Over the past few years, the students have designed the costumes, lighting, directed live music, videotaped the event, and learned a little more about themselves. It is work like this – work that challenges us to look inside ourselves – that makes the program so meaningful.

Balance of Power – Your Word is Golden

In order to have a successful youth ministry program, the kids must have the trust and respect of the adult community. For the youth of a community to be successful and achieve greatness, they must be given responsibilities which carry the respect and trust of the program director, as well as parish community. The youth must be viewed as a valued component of the church. With that in mind, what Brian Williams has done is nothing short of remarkable. His program is “student-run,” as he says. There are several leadership teams with varying responsibilities which meet at the church on a regular basis to discuss and facilitate their agendas. There are service leadership teams, outreach teams, retreat teams, organizational teams for special events, etc... These leadership teams provide the opportunity for young adult to practice, build, and learn the skills and qualities required of good leaders in all communities. Students are trusted with what are normally “adult” responsibilities: contacting township members to secure facilities for special events, ordering materials for those events, handling accounting and revenue responsibilities, among others.

It is important to build respectful and professional relationships with students as well. Instead of asking parents and other adults where they think the program should go and what should be accomplished, ask the kids - for it is truly *their* program. Attend conferences on the local, state, and national levels for both leadership initiatives and Catholic Youth Ministry. Also, forge relationships with other parishes and community groups. Work throughout the diocese to find and share new ideas and meet new people to keep the program from stagnating. It is

important, however, to recruit adult “shadows” for the larger events. Remember, youth and young adults are still in the learning stages of leadership and responsibility, so it is important to have adults readily available in case the students should fall. To accurately define the role of the adult shadow, I must mention that these chaperones should not in any way manage activities that the students design. Students should be allowed to fall – to make mistakes and learn from them. With this balance of adults, young adults, and the program director, any program will be destined for success.

Let me take a moment to talk about the financial issues of a program such as the program at Our Lady of the Snows. We are fortunate enough to have a stipend from the parish, without which we could not operate at the same capacity we now enjoy. However, that is not to say that without this financial support, a program could not be successful. Our budget only pays a portion of our expenses. What we choose to take on afterwards is paid for by donations and fundraising activities. Our most successful programs are those which cost next to nothing – our fundraisers for other charities and causes.

Words of Wisdom

- Have exit strategies. It is advisable to have back-up plans as well as exit strategies to allow failures to be true learning experiences.
- Not everything will run smoothly. There will be conflicts, strengths and weaknesses, and areas for opportunity and growth. Not everyone wants to grow, and everything must be thoroughly thought through so as not to cause any harm.
- Don't be afraid to try new things.
- Whenever any project is undertaken, it is essential to have all your ducks in a row when presenting it to the community for the continuation of your program.
- Have clean-up crews. Everyone wants to be a part of the event and planning, but it is surprising how many will not stay for clean-up if they are not asked!
- Have a database with all students' vital statistics for easy reference.
- It is of the utmost importance to have a central location to choreograph all this activity – a place where students can keep their resources and come for assistance and guidance.

An office space in the parish center with an updated calendar of events is highly recommended.

- Forge relationships with local newspapers and other public relations sources.
- Invite guest speakers with fresh new ideas and perspectives.
- Know that kids will come and go, and not everyone will attend every event. Truly, the same nucleus of kids should not be involved in every event and on every leadership team. Not everyone will participate in the same activity all the time. Some events have large groups; others have small groups.
- Let the program run itself – don't force it.

The Measure of Success – The Big Picture

The respect of the community and local school district is required for a successful program. This point cannot be stressed enough. Open your doors to other parishes, denominations, and communities. All are welcome in the youth program of Our Lady of the Snows. It is remarkable to see groups of students who might not otherwise work or spend time together doing so in a successful youth ministry program. An inviting program, run and facilitated by kids, which has its roots in faith and religion but presents itself in a relaxed way, will be most successful. In our own program, I have been truly amazed and heartened to watch the athletes working with the musicians and the academics working with the exceptional students. When a program merely presents itself as a ministry of presence, all other social stereotypes and conventions become irrelevant – young people enjoy working and spending time together for the greater good. When students and kids are truly involved and instrumental in the life of the parish, a program is successful. It is not about numbers – it is about the individual. If you only have three people show up for an event expecting thirty, the measure of success is how well those three people enjoy themselves. The Youth and Young Adult Ministry program at Our Lady of the Snows Parish now has well over 125 enrolled in high school religious education programs, an additional 176, involved in leadership teams, and over 800 involved in the entire program, but what matters most is the ministry and the opportunities provided both for and by the students. When three kids show up, it is just as successful as when three-hundred show up. When this is realized, you have developed a successful youth ministry program.