



Interview with Joanne Perkins, who is helping involve youth – “Young Vinnies” – in the SVDP mission.

Joanne Perkins is a very active member of our Conference nursing home visitation team and phone team. Joanne can be reached at St. John Neumann Catholic School (SJNCS) at 777-0077, Ext. #103 or email at jperkins@sjncs-knox.org.

Joanne, your connection with many children at SJNCS in administration and with the Evangelizing Sisters of Mary, has inspired you to bring St. Vincent de Paul’s message of friendship with one another and with God and His mission of help for others to the children you work with each day. How have you done this and how have the children responded?

During my fourteen years of employment with SJNCS, I have been a part of many service projects and activities that our student body has participated in to benefit so many members of our immediate community, as well as many other organizations throughout the country. I have witnessed our children’s unselfish motivation (with much support from their parents) as they contributed time and talent to annual school-sponsored charitable events.

During a recent Career/Service Day at SJNCS during Catholic Schools Week, representatives from the St. John Neumann Catholic Church’s SVDP conference set up an information table with handouts regarding what the conference does in the community. Members of the conference made brief presentations to the children and invited them to sign up to pursue participation in a “Vinnies” group to partner with the adult members of SVDP. There was much interest in the program, and while we were approaching the end of the school year, the students have been able to participate in a few charitable events.

The children seem to be excited about this opportunity. What are your plans for the Vinnies at this early point and what are some things the children can expect to do in this ministry?

The plans are to involve the school children not only in charitable activities at the school, but additionally support at functions of St. John Neumann Catholic Church. We would like to present opportunities for the children to interface with the Church’s missions and to be a face of Jesus to the parishioners and people in the community that we serve. We would work to strengthen the bond between church and school through our efforts to assist in the service to the poor, the disabled, and the disheartened. Specific activities may include preparation and delivery of baked goods to the sheriff and police departments to honor them and show support; preparation of Mother’s Day cards to be delivered to women in nursing homes; preparation of Father’s Day book marks to be delivered to nursing homes; plan a collection drive for the area animal shelters; assist with the parish picnics or other family events; assist with school-wide functions such as serving at Grandparent’s Day breakfast or other events; organization of parties for disabled children; food or clothing drives; bake sales.

What stands out as some things children and their parents may want to know about this ministry?

Two of the purposes of the group are spiritual growth and service to the disadvantaged of our community. This is an opportunity for children to build leadership skills and offer service to others, while growing closer to God. The group will be student-led with guidance by parents and adult Vincentians. Youth Vinnies serve the poor, the needy, and the elderly through projects developed and completed by the members themselves. Students elect their own officers. Students have autonomy in using their own ideas and creativity with adult guidance, as well as the participation of a school staff member(s) and our religious sisters.

How may parent be involved?

Parents can become involved through their children's activities depending on the nature of the event. There will be a variety of activities throughout the year, and we would welcome any expertise and assistance a parent may have that would enhance the nature of our projects.

I understand that we will have a visitor from another parish who will be coming to share insights and information about their Vinnie conference. When will that happen and can children and parents come to meet with her and you?

A meeting that is open to the children and interested parents is planned as we begin our new school year. Sister Teresa Daly, the National Director of SVDP's youth organization located in New Orleans, Louisiana and Marion Ruuge-Aronson located at Good Shepherd's parish in Newport, TN have contacted me, and we are working to include them in the informational meeting.

What are your hopes for the next 3-6 months and the next year for this ministry?

Being an active member of SJNCC's SVDP conference, I have become so much more aware of the continuing need for support and assistance to the people not only in our immediate parish community, but in the surrounding areas of Knoxville. There are ongoing needs and situations that require more resources than we may have available at any given time.

What are some specific things children have expressed an interest in doing to help people who may be lonely or in need?

Visitations to the area nursing homes, arts/crafts of items for homeless centers, school plays/musicals for select needy audiences.