

## Local Kids Come Together For Project Inspirica

By New Canaan Advertiser

A group of dedicated teenagers came together in service during the recent school break over a three-day period at participating churches in New Canaan. The effort, referred to as Better Together: Project Inspirica, emerged as a product of local church youth ministers who now gather several times a year to share ideas and develop joint projects to pull teens together.

"We found that we all have the mission of instilling the importance of service, care and compassion for others into our young people and we felt that coming together in Better Together projects would allow our teens to recognize that they share this common bond, regardless of their religious affiliation," said Chris Otis, director of youth and family ministry at St. Aloysius Roman Catholic Church.



The Congregational Church, St. Aloysius Roman Catholic Church and St. Mark's Episcopal Church served as home bases for the preparation of 800 lunches over a three-day period for the children of Inspirica in Stamford, with members of Grace Community Church and the First Presbyterian Church also participating.

Inspirica is one of the largest providers of services to the homeless in Connecticut and the largest in lower Fairfield County. They operate emergency and transitional housing as well as permanent affordable housing. A large percentage of those they serve are low income families. The group was made aware that the families may not have lunches available over the break and decided that this would be a worthy project for their teens.

"Beyond supporting an incredible organization like Inspirica," said Congregational Church Youth Minister Caroline Ainsworth, "it was really special to watch so many of the young people of our faith communities come together." This was reinforced by her counterpart at Grace Community Church, Rob Knechtle, he added, "The food packing event was a powerful time for youth to partner together and serve others during the holiday season. It gets at the privilege of giving back when we have been given so much."

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Over the three days, close to 100 teens, supported by many adults, took time from their vacations to make sandwiches, decorate lunch bags with uplifting messages, bag cookies and fill lunch bags. The New Canaan High School girls hockey team came out in force to support the event. Sisters Nancy and Claire Leville opted to work together and felt that "making sandwiches for underprivileged kids was a great way to spend our Christmas break and definitely a rewarding experience. This was a special time for us because we were able to help others while spending time as sisters. It is such a good feeling when you are having fun while you know you are helping someone else."

Nancy attends Belmont College in Nashville and Claire is sophomore at New Canaan High School. Sofia Paloka, a junior at New Canaan High School, said it was "amazing to see people of all ages, religious denominations and personalities come together to work toward helping others. No matter how young or how old an individual was, everyone was so excited to help and be a part of something that we don't get to do every day."

The group has other projects in the works.

"I'm so glad to see young people from across churches in New Canaan coming together for a common and compassionate," said John Kennedy of St. Mark's Episcopal Church. "It's wonderful to see people living into Jesus' call to care for all, especially those in need, and especially during the season that commemorates his birth. I look forward to our next project together".

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