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Games, pizza, pool make faith lessons fun

Sharon Dargay , hometownlife.com & The Milford Times 3:20 p.m. ET Jan. 9, 2017



Kevin Szawala promises teens fun, food, and a faith message that “doesn’t preach down their throats” at his monthly Faith & Fun nights at Carl’s YMCA in Milford. “We had 50 middle school students come out in December and it’s growing fast,” said Szawala, director of youth programs at St. Mary’s Our Lady of the Snows Catholic Church in Milford. “We’re getting some kids coming from the community. If they aren’t even Catholic or Christian or any faith, that’s fine. We want to make it a safe place where they can come and just be loved.” Szawala, a Commerce Township resident who talks about bullying, kindness and youth leadership at schools nationwide, became St. Mary’s youth minister last year. He launched a series of youth programs at the YMCA in September. Ninth- through 12th-graders meet from 6-8 p.m. Sunday, twice monthly and sixth- through eighth-graders come together for Faith & Fun nights from 6:30-8:30 p.m. Saturday, once a month, at the YMCA, 300 Family Drive.

The program includes gym activities, games, food and a faith message. Middle school students, for example, played bubble soccer last month. Some meetings also engaged teens in community service projects. In November, armed with baked goods and flowers, students visited home-bound residents, widows and widowers, and other individuals in need of kindness. High school students from both St. Mary’s and Church of the Holy Spirit in Highland, Sunday, Jan. 8, visited Children’s Village Mandy’s Place in Pontiac.

“It’s been good. Every time he has a meeting it gets bigger,” said Colleen Gonzalez, St. Mary’s director of faith formation. “He has only been here six months and has made such an impact on reaching out to the community. He is involved and connected and willing to put himself out there and I think the kids see that and they feel safe with that. They can be themselves and relax. It’s not a formal religious education program. It’s fun with friends and people of similar values.”

Fun, inspiring



Kathleen Popoff, a St. Mary's member who chaperoned the bubble soccer event, said Szawala "knows how to get teens and pre-teens involved in a pretty cool way." She was impressed by the mix of activities and was touched when Szawala showed the group a memento he received from Sandy Hook Elementary School, site of a mass shooting in 2012.

The bubble soccer event was her kids' first involvement in Szawala's youth nights at the YMCA. Her son, Nate, a sixth-grader, called the activity "awesome" and said he also liked watching

inspirational videos at the event. Her daughter, Kate, an 11th-grader, said her friends, who aren't members of the church, want to participate again.

Michael Roycht, an eighth-grader and St. Mary's member, hasn't missed a Faith & Fun meeting. He has enjoyed playing floor hockey, basketball, relay games and 9-square with friends, eating "cool food" and listening to an inspirational message. "Mr. Peace's lessons are short and simple, basically talking and watching videos, but they have great impact," he said. His mom, Laura Roycht, has chaperoned at the program, and said Szawala's message "leaves you with a smile and nudges you to be good to others."

Reaching out



In addition to his youth ministry, Szawala continues to speak at assemblies nationwide and responds to teens who share their stories about being bullied or feeling marginalized. Teens contact him through his website and social media pages.

"So many kids reach out to me every day from all over that are in pain. I tell them I don't have all the answers," Szawala said. "I respond with the Holy Spirit guiding me. Some of these kids feel alone. They have so many friends on social media but yet, they still feel alone because they don't have people to lift them up and encourage them. The kids reach out on a daily basis."

Szawala studied economics, Spanish and global change as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor. His master's degree in business administration is from Wayne State University. He worked in the automotive industry for five years becoming a motivational speaker for youth. Szawala also has served as youth minister at St. Joseph's Church in South Lyon, and St. James the Greater in Novi. He has released six faith-based rap albums and is working on a CD for release this spring. He also is writing a book that will include motivational messages and resources for parents.

Visit his website at mrpeace.org.

sdargay@hometownlife.com

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