

Basildon youth feel the cold!



From midnight on Friday 1st April until sunrise (6.30am) on Saturday 2nd a group of 23 young people from the Catholic Parish of Our Lady and All Saints, Basildon, had a taste of what it feels like to be homeless. They slept outside, in the church car park, to raise awareness of homelessness and to experience just how it is when you can't sleep in a warm bed, in a warm room. The sleepout raised at least £1600 which will be split 50% for parish youth projects, and 50% for project 58:7, helping homeless people in Basildon.

It was a pretty cold night – the temperature dipped to as low as four degrees, with a bit of a wind chill in the air as well, and in the morning the young people described it as “rough.” “It was so uncomfortable,” said one, and another said, “I can't believe how cold it was – and it could have been worse. It could have been raining, or snowing. How do people stand it, every night?” One young adult, Joe, summed it up in a single word – “Brutal,” he said. “That was a brutal experience.”





Earlier in the evening Phyl McLaren told the young people more about Project 58:7. Between twenty and thirty people get a hot meal, three times a week, with the food paid for from fundraising like the sleepout. The project also supplies blankets and sleeping bags, and helps people to try to find permanent accommodation. It is a project run by several of the Basildon churches, and is at the front line of helping the homeless because there is no shelter for the homeless in Basildon.



Phyl shared some facts with the young people, which really hit home. More than half the homeless people in Britain are aged under 21. Many have been kicked out of their homes, “sofa-surfed” for a while, and eventually have nowhere to go but the streets. That causes despair, and in despair they often try to block the pain with drugs and alcohol. Phyl told us that 12,500 sixteen and seventeen year olds will sleep rough in the UK at some point in 2016. And she encouraged the young people to think deeply about what it would be like, at their age, to sleep outside alone – not only the cold, but the fear and the vulnerability.



The young adults from Our Lady and All Saints were in a safe environment, with leaders awake through the night. But there is no doubt that the experience has deeply moved them. “I will never look at a homeless person in the same way again,” said one. “Don’t judge!”



Fr Dominic Howarth is the Catholic Parish Priest, and he stayed out all night with the group. He said, “Nights like this are faith in action. Not only because of the money raised, but because it shows us – really shows us – what Jesus meant when he said ‘love your neighbour.’ I know that this is an experience the young people will never forget – and it also shows them that what we celebrate in church on a Sunday is not just for an hour a week, but should transform our lives, our attitudes, and the way we approach others – especially the poorest. Our young people were excellent last night – and I also thank the parishioners who revived them with bacon sandwiches for breakfast, their families for their great support, and all who sponsored them.”

To donate, mark an envelope “Sleepout” and make cheques payable to “Our Lady and All Saints.” Post to Fr Dominic, Holy Trinity Church, 71 Wickhay, Basildon SS15 5AD. For more information about everything in the parish visit www.basildoncatholics.org