

GPA Participants Put Faith into Action

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Generation Peace Academy participants are taking their character training and lessons in faith and putting them into action. For the past month, the young Unificationists have been involved in community outreach and service in nine locations around the United States. Already in their eighth month of the gap-year program, they are eager to make a smooth transition from their rigorous and focused way of life and bring the valuable lessons they've learned back to their own community.

In Maryland, GPA members have done a little of everything, from volunteering at the New Hope Academy to visiting a local Boy Scout troop and Women's Federation for World Peace chapter. In addition, they have received internal guidance and been rejuvenated during workshops and retreats.

Many of the community programs have tried to have a balance of this kind, with time for reflection as well as active service work or witnessing. Each location has its unique landscapes, people and culture. Even sightseeing sometimes offers inspiring spiritual experiences, as in Los Angeles, where participants visited Camp Mozumdar, a mountain retreat with historical significance for the Unification Church and the local area. The camp is home to a church building whose unique design comes from the idea of uniting world religions—which GPA found particularly beautiful and fitting!

Many of the teams have focused a significant amount of time on witnessing, including teams in Las Vegas, New Jersey, New Hampshire and Omaha. From the UNLV campus to the New England countryside, GPA participants gained valuable experience speaking with others and sharing their faith. One New Hampshire team member observed: "Some people do it on the streets, approaching strangers with pamphlets, bookmarks and a smile, inviting them to our church service every Sunday. Witnessing also takes a more natural setting. Simply by living one's faith and leading a happy, loving life, one witnesses [by] being an example. Our team here in Manchester does a bit of both."

In Omaha, the GPA members shared their fears and got pep talks from more experienced members in

order to prepare for their witnessing. By the end of the day they realized, “Many of the fears we all had were, as always, just our imagination, and God was able to present a much more loving and deep experience with all of us.”

Though reaching out through witnessing and service work was a big part of the experience, participants also gained valuable lessons while “reaching in”—participating in local church efforts and getting to know those communities.

The Minneapolis team had to fight its way through an April snowstorm but was welcomed warmly by the community, and over the next week helped with a WFWP event, got to know the local youth group, and even helped out at a Blessing workshop in Iowa.

In Columbus, the team made time for discussion on “hot topics,” questions about their faith and how it is practiced, and received guidance and perspective from elders in the community.

The GPA members in Philadelphia gained valuable experience working with the Sunday school. “For me, being surrounded, encouraged or even called out by all these kids who care helps me so much to push myself and reminds me that what we’re working for is worth the effort,” said a team member. The New Jersey team fundraised \$3,600 for the local church, to be used for building a café and supporting other ministry activities.

The GPA program has been, for many, a way to understand their faith, meet and fellowship with the national community, give back to a larger cause, and learn how to communicate their faith to others. These are skills and lessons that will help them transition into whatever journey lies ahead of them after graduation from GPA in June. Whether it be college, work or another kind of ministry, organizers hope that the foundation is being laid for these young people to go out into the world and thrive.