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16 TEENS AND YOUTH LEADERS SERVED THE POOR OF PHILADELPHIA AND INITIATED FOCUS NORTH AMERICA'S NEWEST PROGRAM

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This past weekend, August 28-30, 2009, the Orthodox Youth Outreach Program (OYO), now called the YES Program of FOCUS North America (Youth Equipped to Serve), took its first trip as a ministry of FOCUS North America. A group of 16 eager teens and leaders said yes to the “cry of the poor” (Proverbs 21:13) and gave their time in service to the people of Philadelphia, PA.

The weekend began with orientation, led by Katrina Bitar, YES Program Director. The rest of Friday evening was spent in prayer, the team's first ministry to Philadelphia. The group traveled around the city and prayed for it and its people. This prayer tour kicks off all YES trips, orienting the team to the past and present of the community they will serve and opening their eyes to the real struggles of its people.

Saturday was a fruitful day of ministry. The team spent their morning preparing and serving lunch to 75 homeless men and women. They then embraced the challenging task of weeding out a neglected garden that had previously been the joy of an impoverished community. Their work brought tears of excitement to the elderly in the community who did not have the strength and resources to maintain the garden themselves. The students concluded their day by bringing food, drink, and fellowship to the people who were spending that night outside in the rain in a Philadelphia park. The impact of this encounter was beyond words.

“Being face to face with the poorest of the poor opens a teenager's eyes to the true meaning of Christian life. They come to see that God has equipped them for His work. They come to see that they have been given the resources to meet the fundamental needs of people. They come to love God in ways they never have before because they are deeply thankful for what they have been given. Most importantly, they realize what it means to be the Church; they become Christ for all people and learn to see Christ in everyone they meet in their daily lives,” said Katrina Bitar, YES Program Director.

The mission of FOCUS North America's YES Program is training the youth to follow Christ's example by dying to themselves. The program transforms them from observers into leaders through a four-step service learning process known as E4. They are **Exposed**, through interactive curriculum, to the reality of poverty in the world and in themselves. They are then **Engaged** in practical service to others, losing themselves in the encounter with men and women created and loved by Christ, striving to be flexible, available, and teachable. An intensive leadership training week further **Equips** those who have participated in at least two weekend YES trips to guide others in their service to the poor. Finally, the youth are **Entrusted** with continuing the mission of YES in their communities, to inspire, lead, and educate others.

The impact of this process was tangible in this weekend's debriefing session. The students were asked to fill in the blank to this sentence: "My experience here has been ____." These answers that were given are common to all YES participants: **Amazing. Inspiring. Rewarding. Necessary.**

The students' weekend in Philadelphia is over, but their experience has committed them to dedicating their lives to those in need.

As one of the participants Christina Fakes said, *"Now I don't see the poor and needy as "poor people" or "homeless people," but as actual people who have names and histories and loved ones, who need our help and compassion."*

"The mission of YES fits perfectly within FOCUS North America because its program guides and equips the youth to love and serve others, giving them the tools to create opportunities for service in their own parishes and, hopefully, to inspire future FOCUS North America leaders to dedicate their lives to Orthodox Christian social action," said Fr. Justin Matthews, Executive Director, FOCUS North America.

FOCUS North America is a 501c3 not-for-profit organization. Donations can be made online at www.FOCUSNorthAmerica.org or checks can be made out to "FOCUS North America" and sent to:

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