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Girls weather the storm at camporee

Ashleigh Kassock | Special to the Catholic Herald

10/19/21

The largest national camporee for American Heritage Girls saw 460 girls and 300 adults from Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia, Ohio and South Carolina camped out on the Fredericksburg Agricultural Fairgrounds Oct. 16. This is the fourth year the camporee has taken place in Fredericksburg, according to organizers Maureen Siegmund and Lynne Malinowski, parishioners of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Church in Fredericksburg.

Last year, the camporee was canceled due to the pandemic.

American Heritage Girls is a Christ-centered leadership and character development ministry started by a group of parents in 1995. According to the organization's website, its mission is to build women of integrity through service to God, family, community and country.

"In American Heritage Girls we are all about girl leadership and a lot of our middle schoolers and high schoolers are required to teach younger girls as part of earning their badge," said Siegmund. "But a lot of times they have no one to teach them the skills unless they are looking at YouTube. This year our theme is freedom. We figured after breaking out of our COVID lockdowns exploring the concept of freedom would be really important."

The programs at this year's camporee included a talk about being the women God intended, financial freedom, and being drug and disease free. A program for the shooting sports badge also was offered with BB guns because, according to Malinowski, the badge can be hard to earn due to lack of equipment and expertise.

One of the new programs Siegmund and Malinowski were excited about this year explores the idea of personal freedom in the Underground Railroad program. The was led by reenactor Denise Benedetto who is part of a group called Women of the Civil War Era. Dressed in costume and acting in character, she taught the girls about the life of an African American slave and the hope that drew them to the Underground Railroad.

"I want to empower girls to get to know and love history," said Benedetto. "I want their stories told. I don't want them whitewashed into the background. To have the opportunity to help empower these young ladies, that was my motivation for coming today."

A challenge to the weekend arose when a rainstorm blew into the area early Saturday evening. The girls checked that their tents were secure and dry, donned their colorful ponchos and boots, and got back to business. Their efforts were rewarded with a rainbow right before Mass, celebrated by Father Phillip M. Cozzi, parochial vicar of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception.

Erin Gardner, aged 16, has been with the American Heritage Girls since she was in kindergarten. She is now in the top level as a patriot and will be working on her stars and stripes service project this year, equivalent to the Boy Scouts eagle badge.

"It was different this year because we had a break because of COVID. (In 2019) we had more than 1,000 campers. This year we had a little less, but we still had a bunch of girls," said Gardner. "I really enjoyed the fellowship with other troops, the extra free time built in and all the activities."

After both Mass and a nondenominational service, most of the campers set to work preparing dinner and getting ready for bed, while the day campers packed up their cars to return home with damp gear and happy memories.

Kassock is a freelancer in Fredericksburg.

Find out more

Go to americanheritagegirls.org. (americanheritagegirls.org)

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