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Teens sleep out to raise awareness

Signs, money used to help Center for the Homeless.



From left are Matt Beatty, Bethy Williams and Danielle Redman, all students at Adams High School and members of the First Unitarian Church youth group, as they stand vigil with signs to make the community aware of the homeless in South Bend. Tribune Photo /GENE KAISER

By **DAVE STEPHENS** *Tribune Staff Writer*

SOUTH BEND – On the street corner, teenage girls are waving homemade signs about the plight of the homeless.

Five feet away, waiting for the red light to change green, a man sat in his late model BMW and stared straight ahead, refusing to glance at the girls or their signs.

"It's funny how some people won't even acknowledge you," said 18-year-old Bethy Williams on Saturday, as she and about eight other teenagers at First Unitarian Church prepared to spend a night sleeping in cardboard boxes to help raise awareness about the homeless.

"It kind of makes you sense, just a little bit, about what the homeless go through."

Saturday night, as the sun and its warmth were setting on the horizon, the youth group gathered near the corner of Michigan Avenue and North Shore Drive to raise awareness about the community's homeless situation. The group chose this weekend, when evening temperatures were expected to fall to the mid 20s, because other Unitarian Universalist youth groups across the country were holding similar events this weekend.

"By sleeping outside, even if for just one night, it's going to help me understand what some people have to go through," said 18-year-old Matt Beatty, an Adams High School senior.

Through donations from friends, family and their congregation, the youth group members said they were raising donations for South Bend's Center for the Homeless. The teens had recently visited the center and learned that people here suffer without homes.

"It's something I had never really thought about, except when I go to big cities and see homeless people there," said 14-year-old Lydia Coppedge. "But there are a lot of people here who need help too."

Youth group leaders Brook Hardy and John Horton said they have been amazed at the teens' desire to raise awareness about the homeless problem.

"This isn't just about homeless," Hardy said. "This is about how we all need to come together to help each other."

Standing with the teens and holding her own sign, Joy Pletcher, a Unitarian congregation

member, said she decided to spend the night with the youth group because she wanted people to know that they could make a difference in the lives of others.

"This is the first time I've ever done something like this," Pletcher said.

But even as the sun set lower in the sky and the temperature began to drop, the teens stood and waived signs to all who passed by.

"Our community is not immune," read one sign.

"South Bend needs you," read another.

"Last year our group went to Mexico, and saw some of the poverty there," said 18-year-old Nalani Stolz. "But then we came back here and saw that we have the same problems, and we wanted to raise awareness, to let people know that we can make a difference here too."

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