

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN GRAND COTEAU

For over thirty-five years, the Thensted Center in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, has focused on human needs and brought people together in productive collaboration. A recent volunteer called it a place of “restorative justice.”

Megan Skinner, a volunteer from the University of Notre Dame wrote: “Restorative justice is about putting right social injustices...focusing on the needs, obligations, and collaboration of all involved...the Thensted Center brings together the community – not only kids for the summer program, but the vulnerable people, including the elderly and the mentally disabled.”

Betty Renard, RSCJ, agrees wholeheartedly. “It’s exactly what we do,” said Sister Renard. “Thensted Center operates primarily on faith, donations, and a few small grants, and the work we do is clearly at the heart of our call, first articulated by St. Madeleine Sophie, to work for justice.”

The Religious of the Sacred Heart have always responded to their call to provide outreach services in the communities where they are teaching, working, and living. Thensted Center was begun by Margaret Hoffman, RSCJ, who started a ministry to the poor in St. Landry Parish that included the municipalities of Leonville, Arnaudville, Sunset, Bellevue, and Grand Coteau. Now, in addition to operating Schools of the Sacred Heart for 488 students in Grand Coteau, the RSCJ are actively involved in serving the needs of the poor throughout the area.

The Center addresses such needs as: food, clothing, and household items available through a thrift store; an after-school tutorial program; educational and social activities for senior citizens; counseling services; a money management program for adults; bringing the Eucharist to the homebound or ill; and, in this area, which provides no activities for youth, a summer enrichment program that offers safe, productive



The Thensted Center Summer Enrichment Program offers recreation for Grand Coteau children – as well as education.

education and recreation for children.

Named for Father Cornelius J. Thensted, SJ, the Center is run by two local women, two RSCJ, and numerous volunteers. Mrs. Julia Richard, Thensted’s director, has been with the Center since 1989; assistant director Geraldine Jones has been plant manager and trouble shooter since 1984; Alice Mills, RSCJ, offers counseling services and has worked at the Center since 1991; and Betty Renard, RSCJ, who operates the senior citizen program and visits the homebound, has been at Thensted for over a decade.

Commenting on the philosophy of service that animates the Center, Sister Renard notes that restorative justice can work both ways: “My attraction is to give the heart of Christ to the needy. But I often realize that God is already present, and so in our interaction, we become a gift to one another. Many of these folks who have suffered so much deprivation are resilient and rich in the things of God.” ✦