

## Seafarers Center helps out in payroll disputes

LAKE CHARLES – The Lake Charles Seafarers Center, located at the Port of Lake Charles, provides a variety of services for the sailors who dock at the many facilities along the Calcasieu Ship Channel. For some, it is the transportation the Center's bus gives them to various spots around town. For others, it is the opportunity to telephone their loved ones far away. But, for a number, it has been a financial lifesaver.

Since 2001, Deacon Patrick Lapoint, who became director of the center that year, has kept statistics on the number of ships the Center has helped with a variety of problems. In that time, he has assisted crews from 18 ships who had grievances over pay issues or such things as substandard living and working conditions.

For the crews this has meant the collection of some \$664,000 in back wages.

"That is just since 2001," Lapoint said. "I know more were helped in the years before but we don't have those numbers."

The salary question is something that doesn't come up often, although Lapoint notes it is not because it isn't happening.

"We get ships where they will run two contracts or sets of books," he said. "One will show what the crew is told they will make

and the other is what they are actually paid. Sailors are then required to sign both books to receive their pay, even though the amount is not what was originally agreed upon."

It is not an easy choice for crewmen to come to the Center and voice their complaint.

"It is a big risk to them because they stand a chance of being blackballed," the Deacon continued. "If the captain makes a notation in their seamen's book in the right way, then no one else will hire them. It is a real challenge for them to step up and say enough is enough."

When the decision to complain is made, the sailors will talk directly with Lapoint and he starts the process rolling.

"When they are tired of the situation they will come straight up to you and tell you they have a problem with pay," he said.

Lapoint makes contact with the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) which represents transport workers around the world and promotes their interests through global campaigning and solidarity.

"What we do, we will call the ITF agent for this area, located in New Orleans, and they will fax over all the paper work to fill out and sign," he said. "Once that is done we

fax it back to them. Once the ITF has that in hand, then the agent will come down with a lawyer. They will talk with the captain, talk with the owners to see if they can settle the dispute. If that doesn't happen, they will then go to court and have the ship "arrested." Then things happens fairly quickly. The owner is paying docking fees and no one is touching the ship. That means the owner is losing money and usually expedites the process."

Most of such situations are taken care of within a few days, according to Lapoint, but some last longer.

"The longest one I have seen was a month and a half," he said. "One ship had not only pay problems but they had bad living conditions. The ship required quite a bit of repair and the U.S. Coast Guard got involved in making sure all the repairs were done and they had food onboard. When they came into port they had no food. They had been eating potatoes, three meals a day, for over a week. There were unsafe conditions all over the ship – broken freezers, air conditioning, and broken valves down in the engine room. It was just an unsafe ship."

Many years ago, according to Lapoint, the Center was also involved in helping the crew

of a ship that had been abandoned by its owner. "The Center made sure they had something to eat and could make telephone calls."

When a ship is abandoned, usually the owner will remove the officers from the ship and leave the crew to fend for themselves. It may take time for the courts to take over, oversee the sale of the ship, and distribute the back pay to the sailors and see to their repatriation to their homes.

A sailor's life can be very difficult, especially for men from other countries. Some are at sea for up to 10 months or a year and the pay, by American standards, would seem substandard. But, it's higher than they would make on land in their home country.

"The average salary on a reputable ship for an able-bodied seaman could be \$700 to \$900 per month," Lapoint said. "On less reputable ships it would be lower. I have seen a mess boy making \$150 per month and engineers with degrees making \$400 and \$500 a month, which is more money in most cases than they would make at home."

On ships under United States flags, a recent college graduate could earn \$70,000 a Third Officer.



A sailor from the M/V Margit Gorthon, docked at the City Docks of the Port of Lake Charles, avails himself of the outside telephone at the Seafarers Center at the Port of Lake Charles while his friend awaits his turn to make a call. The new service allows sailors to use the telephone after the Center closes for the day.

## Diocesan group attends "One Bread, One Cup"

Nine local young people, members of the Diocesan Youth Ministry Core Team along with their adult leaders, represented the Diocese of Lake Charles on July 6-10 at the "One Bread, One Cup" youth liturgical leadership conference held on the campus of Saint Meinrad School of Theology in St. Meinrad, Ind.

During the five-day conference, the youth learned about their Catholic faith through sessions of catechesis, liturgical and spiritual formation, and participation in liturgies. They also trained in liturgical ministries, such as lector, extraordinary minister of communion, and cantor, learning skills that they can use in their parishes and high schools.

Youth attending the conference represented St. Joan of Arc, Oberlin; St. Philip Neri, Kinder; Our Lady of Seven Dolours, Welsh; Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Lake Charles; Our Lady Queen of Heaven, Lake Charles; and St. Margaret of Scotland, Lake Charles. They were Leslie Guillory, Mary Torres, Blake Bruchhaus, Payton Fontenot, Haydee Courville, Jacob France, Elizabeth Galan, Alyssa Watkins, and Derek Yeagley. Adult leaders attending included Milissa Thibodeaux, Director of Youth Ministry for the Diocese, along with Corrine Granger and Allison Torres.

The "One Bread, One Cup" conference is held three times each summer as a program of Saint Meinrad School of Theology. The School is operated by the Benedictine monks of Saint Meinrad Archabbey and offers initial and continuing education for priests, deacons, and lay ministers.



S.T.E.P.S., a mission work program established by Christ the King Catholic Church and Society for the Propagation of the Faith by Father Wayne LeBleu, began in 2004 as a parish mission where high school and middle school youth performed various home maintenance tasks for homebound people in Christ the King Parish. The focus of the S.T.E.P.S. mission is to equip middle school youth with leadership skills, group negotiating skills, stewardship of time, and a sense of community awareness. This year's mission was held from June 26 to June 29. Pictured, from left, are Aidan Ackley, Tyler Nunez, David Johnson, David Swire, and Logan Toothman as they load up a pickup with materials from gutted residence.

## Calling home now easier for sailors

LAKE CHARLES – For the vast majority of Americans, making a telephone call is something taken for granted. After all, with more than 2 billion cell phones in the world and more than 200 million in the U.S., it's easy to find a phone.

However, for the many sailors working on the foreign flagged ships moving through the Port of Lake Charles it's not that easy. The Seafarers Center at the Port of Lake Charles, operated by the Diocese of Lake Charles, has been serving those international workers for many years.

The Center, though, is only open from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. and for some sailors that corresponds to their workday, even in port. Now, after hours sailors won't have to leave the port grounds to find a phone to make a call.

"We have installed a telephone on the outside of the building with a switch inside so we can turn it off and on," Deacon Patrick Lapoint, Center director said. "When we are open, we want them to come in and use the telephones where it is cool but after hours we have the phone outside."

Such a great idea, but one that only came to fruition after an unfortunate incident last month, according to Deacon Lapoint.

"There was a Chinese ship in port and one of the sailors rode his bicycle into town to make a call," Deacon Lapoint said. "He was on his way back to the ship at about 3 a.m. when he was run off the road and robbed at gunpoint. Of course, he did not

have anything on him, so they beat him up a bit. That made us look at doing something to help keep the sailors on port property and safe, if they needed to use the phone after hours."

Being able to make calls home is extremely important to sailors.

"They will spend their last dollars buying phone cards to call home," Lapoint said. "That is one of their key things to keep in touch with their families."

Lapoint is working with various industrial facilities along the ship channel to see to the installation of telephones at sites without them to enable sailors to make calls there rather than have to wait on a ride to the Center.

"Most of them don't have telephones on the docks," he said. "The refineries do but many of the smaller docks don't have that capability. We are trying to get the proper clearances and will apply for a grant from the International Transportation Workers Federation (ITF) and I feel sure that they would look favorably on such a project."

The project would be costly, the telephones are \$1,400 each, because as an ordinary telephone can't be used in such situations.

"They have to be "intrinsically" safe because they are used in an atmosphere where gases or fumes are present, so that no chance a spark could be produced," Lapoint said. "They must be designed for that environment and waterproof as well. We are looking at a total of eight or nine phones as three facilities need two

phones each. "Right now PPG has two installed at their docks that can actually be placed on-board the ship, hooked to the rail, and available for use," he continued.

Several companies have already agreed and others are investigating the possibilities and Lapoint has still others with him he must make contact.

Before the advent of phone cards, the center had a bank of telephones where sailors called direct to their loved ones at home, talked for whatever length of time they wished and then, based on a rate sheet, paid for the number of minutes they were on the phone. For the sailors this could be an expensive proposition.

"Today for \$5 a person could make a call to India and talk for 36 minutes, using a phone card" Deacon Lapoint said. "If they dialed direct they would only be able to talk four minutes for that same \$5."

Volunteers are still being sought by the Seafarers Center to help with its ministry to sailors.

"We particularly need drivers for the evening," Deacon Lapoint said. "We have a second van on order, an eight passenger van, and it is due soon. We will have two vehicles to run and will need more drivers. If the need arises we could run both at the same time. They must be able to work evenings up to 10 p.m."

Contact Deacon Lapoint at 436-1315 for more information about volunteering to aid the ministry to seafarers.



Bernell Ezell, second from left, Director of the Office of Child and Youth Protection for the Diocese of Lake Charles welcomed her counterparts from three other Louisiana dioceses recently at the group's quarterly meeting. At left is Maureen Fontenot from the Diocese of Lafayette. At right is Sam Brocato, Diocese of Alexandria and, second from right, Sr. Mary Ellen Wheelahan, O. Carm., Archdiocese of New Orleans.