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COMMUNITY

Ukraine trip enlightening and enriching

Youth group brings message of hope to fellow teenagers

By **Stephanie Thiessen**
 CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Teenage pregnancy. Alcoholism. Suicide. Abuse. Drugs. Violence. These are just a few of the very real societal plights a group of young people from Southside Community Church traveled to Ukraine to help fight against.

There were many messages the group of Miltonians wanted to deliver to the Ukrainian young people. But the necessity of one message stuck out in Rebekah Lazarski's mind time and again.

"After being there, I'd have to say the key thing to address is letting youths know they have worth and value," said the 25-year-old university student, one of the leaders on the trip.

Fifteen teens and young adults ranging in age from 15 to 26 made the trip from November 17 to 26.

The students *The Champion* spoke with unanimously said they'd gained just as much as they'd given during the trip, which they all agreed they'd remember for a lifetime.

"I came away from the trip very changed," Lazarski said.

Fifteen-year-old Josh Martin, a student at Milton District High School, agreed.

"We're more grateful for what we have now," he said.

For the nine days the Southside group was there, they visited Ukrainian schools and gave interactive presentations confronting the needs of at-risk youth.

They spoke about the importance of protecting their bodies, investing in their futures and finding something to believe in.

The message was conveyed through live music, drama, hi-tech media and personal life stories — a format they could relate to, Lazarski said.

After the presentations, the young people would talk one-on-one with some of the students and invite them to an end-of-the-week party in Kiev, which drew an impressive crowd of 700.

"We're not just about performing dramas, we're about making connections," Lazarski said.

The Miltonians partnered with a group called Global 180 Student Communications, which aims to help young people achieve personal success through character develop-



GRAHAM PAINE / CANADIAN CHAMPION

GLOBETROTTERS: Ukraine trip participants (from left) Rebekah Lazarski, Quinn Ward, Cole Madansky, Josh Martin, Andrew Dempster, Linsey Pelkey and Joel Bakker display some of the souvenirs from their recent excursion.

ment and healthy life choices.

It's a Christian group, but as Lazarski explained, their job wasn't to preach but rather to love.

"We as Christians want to practically impact our world and allow people to know they have worth and value," she said.

This isn't the first time Lazarski has been to Ukraine. She also went in 2003 for a similar purpose, and said she's wanted to return for the past three years.

"For almost four years I've been longing to get back," she said.

It was on her first trip that Lazarski met two troubled girls who touched her heart. They were deeply affected by the message the 2003 team brought, she said, and she stayed in touch with them.

They were a big part of the reason she

returned, Lazarski said, and she was able to spend more time with them and see how they had changed their lives around.

Communicating wasn't as difficult as you might think, Lazarski said, since most of the teens spoke some English and they had translators on hand.

The cost of the trip was a staggering \$42,000, which the Southside group raised thanks to donations from families and friends, and various fundraisers.

Josh Martin said it wasn't difficult to relate to the students in Ukraine, and that he enjoyed talking one-on-one with them.

It gave him a different perspective on life, he said.

"With them, if they want to buy something new for themselves, sometimes they won't buy food for a day."

He said he now thinks twice before buying things he doesn't really need.

For someone who's never been outside North America, the trip was educational as well as fun.

"The culture there is so much more relaxed," Josh said. "Here, we're so uptight and concerned with making money and getting things fast."

Sixteen-year-old Quinn Ward, also a student at Milton District, said there were some challenges to the trip — such as not getting much sleep — but overall it was very rewarding.

"It was a really good experience. I learned a lot."

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Tuesday, December 26	Wednesday, December 27	Thursday, December 28	Friday, December 29	Saturday, December 30	Sunday, December 31
11:00am - 8:30pm Plugged In! Extra 9:00pm - 10:00pm Halton Hills Council (cc) Dec 11, 2006	11:00am - 1:00pm Plugged In! Extra 1:00pm - 4:00pm Halton Hills Council (cc) Dec 11, 2006 4:00pm - 9:00pm Plugged In! Extra 9:00pm - 10:00pm Milton Council Dec 18, 2006	11:00am - Noon Plugged In! Extra 1:00pm - 2:00pm Milton Council Dec 18, 2006 2:00pm - 9:00pm Plugged In! Extra 9:00pm - 10:00pm Halton Regional Council Dec 20, 2006	11:00am - 1:00pm Plugged In! Extra 1:00pm - 2:00pm Halton Regional Council Dec 20, 2006 3:00pm - 10:00pm Plugged In! Extra	11:00am - 10:00pm Plugged In! Extra	11:00am - 10:00pm Plugged In! Extra