



**Mike Haas, left, with the help of two youngsters, steadies a bunk bed while Josiah Haas attaches a side board. The bunk bed was one of several service projects undertaken last week by an Illinois church group visiting Athens County.**

## **Illinois families travel to Southeast Ohio to help those in need**

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The group is made up of 33 people from 10 families, and they are all on vacation in Southeastern Ohio, but don't look for them at Strouds Run or Lake Snowden.

They are all members of CrossTown Church in Bolingbrook, Ill., and came in a caravan of cars to spend their vacations helping area residents in need.

For about 15 years, Good Works Inc., a private nonprofit organization based in Athens, has invited volunteers from around the country to spend a week helping others. They repair roofs, build home access ramps, paint, work in community gardens, mow lawns and do other jobs for those in need.

Good Works Executive Director Keith Wasserman said volunteers stay in Good Works dormitories. Most are youth groups and adult sponsors, so last week's group of families was unique. They include parents and grandparents, and children ranging in age from 2 to 16 years. One family is represented by three generations. It's the third Good Works service trip by people from the 200-member church.

“This is our largest group,” said Linda Smith. “A lot of families from our first trip in 2004 loved it so much they had to come again.”

She said her church does service projects at home and likes to reach out to help others. They value a life of service and want their children to experience the satisfaction that comes from helping others.

“We want our kids to grow up wanting to serve. This is such a great opportunity for our kids to learn things that are not taught in school, and our kids are thrilled with what they’ve done this week,” Smith said on Friday. “They come back everyday with stories of what they’ve done and how the people are so appreciative of what they’ve done. They are all charged up and ready to go back and do more.”

Wasserman said part of the goal is to create the type of experiences described by the Illinois volunteers.

“It’s important to have their help, but it’s also important for people to have a transformational experience when they are here. It is even better when children are involved,” Wasserman said. “(This) week we have a family of seven who will be here.”

Wasserman said the week of service is “a beautiful way” for families to bond and grow closer, all while they are helping others. Smith agreed.

“This is a nice opportunity for families to come together for a vacation with a purpose,” she said. “It’s a whole week of not worrying about laundry and other (chores at home) and just focus on service and on each other. Our kids work all day and then come back here (to Good Works’ campus near Athens), where they have this great property so they can pretty much just be kids and run and play.”

Wasserman said Good Works runs newspaper ads to discover work projects of those in need.

“It’s mostly widows and disabled people we help,” he said. “When the needs come in, we don’t usually do them immediately. We match them up with volunteers who come with the skills that are needed.”

Each day begins with a devotional tied to service and helping others, which is led by one of six summer interns. After breakfast, the families go off in many different directions for a day of helping others.

“Today we put down a new tile floor together and stained a deck,” Smith said.

Sarah Davis, 9, said she helped build bunk beds and went to a woman’s house to paint.

“We painted the room of a sweet lady who told us about her life,” Sarah said. “She showed us pictures of her family. I think after today she considers us her family, too.”

Smith said she and her daughters had a great time working at Good Works Summer Lunch Program.

“We helped prepare a community meal,” she said. “It was so neat to see everyone coming together for this wonderful meal. What they made depended on what was donated, and it was neat to see. It was wonderful to (be a part of) making this community meal and then sitting down and eating with them. The girls all went to different tables and met different people.”

The families helped on many projects, including putting a temporary patch on a roof with a large hole at one house and repairing a floor missing half its support beams at another house.

Sarah Davis talked about standing on the deck they’d stained earlier in the week and talking to the woman they’d helped.

“She hugged us and cried,” Sarah said. “She said no one visits her, and she really loves us.”

