

First Parish UU in Arlington, MA, Offers Its Youth Exceptional Opportunities for Environmental Justice Learning and Service

First Parish UU in Arlington, MA, which received its Green Sanctuary accreditation in March 2013, really knows how to walk the talk when it comes to involving its Youth Group in



justice work. Every year, the youth participate in a major social action project,

alternating years between a local service project and a service trip to another part of the country. In 2011, the church engaged Amizade – a non-profit organization offering service trips around the world, with an emphasis on intercultural immersion and exchange – to provide the venue for Youth Group members to meet, work with, and learn from people suffering from environmental injustices. Their exciting story follows.

All images are from First Parish and Amizade websites. If your congregation would like to learn more about First Parish’s experience, please contact Bill Gardiner through the church office: churchoffice@firstparish.info – *Ellen McClaran, UUA Green Sanctuary Team Volunteer*

Work Through Amizade in Arizona and West Virginia

By Bill Gardiner, Chair, Green Sanctuary Climate Change Task Force

Amizade (Portuguese for friendship) Global Service Learning is a non-profit organization based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Morgantown West Virginia. Amizade works with individuals and groups to provide opportunities for service work (educational, environmental, and health projects) in communities around the world. Amizade coordinates its programs with existing community-based organizations. Projects are found in Ghana, Tanzania, Trinidad, Tobago, Northern Ireland, Poland, Brazil, Bolivia, Jamaica, the Navajo Nation, and Appalachia. Since its founding in 1996, 6,000 volunteers from North America, South America, Europe, and Asia and have participated in Amizade programs. You can learn more about Amizade on their website at www.amizade.org

THE TRIP TO THE NAVAJO RESERVATION IN TUBA CITY, ARIZONA

The youth group at First Parish Arlington first entered into relationship with Amizade in 2011 for a trip to Tuba City, Arizona [[photos and more information](#)]. In February of 2011, 43 youth and 13 adults volunteered at a boarding school on the Navajo Reservation.



In preparation for the trip, the youth group learned about the importance of service. They had discussions about the dynamics of power and privilege when doing service work. They studied the Navajo People, their history, and their customs. While on the reservation participants learned first-hand about the lives of people living on the reservation – their struggles and their triumphs.

Being on the reservation and in the desert, members of the youth group explored issue of access to water and what that means for the community. Culturally the youth were exposed to a way of life and a cultural identity closely tied to the land and the landscape.

THE TRIP TO WILLIAMSON, WEST VIRGINIA

From June 28 through July 5, 2013 a group of 54 youth and 16 adults will travel on two buses from Arlington, Massachusetts to participate in the Amizade Program in Williamson, West Virginia [[photos and more information](#)].



Williamson is located in the heart of Appalachia on the border of West Virginia and Kentucky. Williamson has a population of 3,500. Coal has been the basis of the economy, with approximately 40% of the jobs in the region directly linked to the coal industry.

Williamson is in Mingo County, one of the poorest counties in the United States. Twenty one percent of local residents live below the poverty threshold. Large numbers of people suffer from poor health and obesity. People do not have access to good quality food. And, there is an out-migration from the state as young people move away to find work.

In the midst of these difficult circumstances, there is an organization called Sustainable Williamson. This organization works to create a sustainable community model for low-wealth communities throughout Central Appalachia. The model includes the Williamson Health and Wellness Clinic, which is a community organization that encourages healthy life styles by providing better quality food and teaches people about walking and exercise programs. Another initiative encourages the development of local food systems and the sponsorship of a Farmer's Market. There is also a major focus on using solar power to provide sustainable energy.

The youth group is engaged in an intense learning process to prepare for the trip. They are participating in gardening workshops and learning about bulb planting. There are two workshops provided by Boston Mobilization on classism and inequality. People are studying the history and culture of Appalachia.

Three fund raising projects will be held to raise \$11,000 (in addition to individual contributions) including a prom, an auction and a music benefit.

The goals of the program are to teach the youth about the importance of service, the need to be responsible citizens, and how we live our Unitarian Universalist faith in the world. During the trip youth will see a very different part of the world. They will be able to take what they have learned about oppression and apply it to what is going on in Appalachia. They will have an opportunity to do service work in accountable ways with people in the community.

Leaders in Sustainable Williamson refer to Mingo County as a “food desert” where local people do not have access to fresh food and produce. By hearing from people in the community, youth group members will learn about the causes of a “food desert”: poverty, powerlessness, lack of access, and the unjust economics of the region.

But they will also learn how the people of Appalachia are empowering themselves by organizing new organizations, creating gardens, doing sustainable development, and developing green spaces. Volunteers from First Parish will be working with local people in a variety of projects including: planting raised bed community gardens, building greenhouses to extend the growing season, connecting with the local farmer’s markets, updating and rehabilitating local bike and walking trails, and cooking with the local Garden Club. They will meet with leaders from organizations like Sustainable Williamson and Central Appalachia Sustainable Economies to learn about their organizing strategies.



The group will do a worship service (July 28) to share what they learned on their trip with members of the congregation. Participants will also maintain a blog while on the trip to share their experiences with the church community.

As a carbon offset, the youth group will be donating funds to Sustainable Williamson’s Indiegogo campaign to build a “smart office” in Williamson. This “green resource” will educate local people about sustainable construction and development.

Teaching young people that they can be agents of change – that they can make a difference in the world-is at the heart of shaping Unitarian Universalist identity. Through these journeys to other parts of the country our youth learn new ways of seeing the world and they develop the knowledge and skills to be effective change agents. It is truly amazing to see the impacts that these trips have on the youth and adults that to on them.