News

Teresian Sister Dolores Aviles speaks to children attending Camp I-CAN in Uvalde, Texas, July

Teresian Sister Dolores Aviles speaks to children attending Camp I-CAN in Uvalde, Texas, July 25, 2022. Sponsored by Catholic Extension, the July 25-28 camp offered survivors of the Robb Elementary School mass shooting a safe space to heal, have fun and gently reintegrate into a school-like setting around their peers. "I-CAN" stands for inner strength, commitment, awareness and networking. (CNS photo/Juan Guajardo, courtesy Catholic Extension)



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Chicago-based Catholic Extension launched the first of many initiatives it has planned over the next 18 months to support Uvalde, Texas, following the devastation of the Robb Elementary mass shooting.

It sponsored Camp I-CAN July 25-28 at the St. Henry de Osso Project Center in Uvalde to provide third, fourth and fifth graders a safe space to heal, have fun, and gently reintegrate the children into a school-like setting around their peers.

I-CAN stands for inner strength, commitment, awareness and networking.

The majority of the children who attended the camp are survivors of the May 24 shooting, although all Uvalde children of age were invited to participate.

Led by Sr. Dolores Aviles and 13 other religious sisters, the camp offered faith-based activities; arts and crafts; 30-minute intervals of physical activity; a game room for playtime, music and entertainment led by the sisters; and a family supper for the children and family members.

Born and raised in Uvalde, Aviles said she felt a strong calling to minister to the very people she grew up with. Among those who perished in the school shooting were her own family members -- three children of her cousins. Although heartbroken, she committed to her mission of serving the local church.

With the support of Catholic Extension, and with her fellow Uvalde-based Teresian sisters and other sisters from across the country, Camp I-CAN was born.

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"Jesus simply said to me, 'Let the children come to Me', and that is exactly what this camp was designed to do," Aviles said. "This week, we wanted the children and their families to know that we are praying for them, we love them, and that we will also take action for them. That's what community is. We support each other. God sends us out two-by-two."

Catholic Extension and Uvalde share a long and rich history. Uvalde was one of the first communities Catholic Extension supported, helping build Sacred Heart Church in 1906 and Sacred Heart Catholic School in 1912, both of which remain relevant institutions "in this grieving city," a news release said.

"Uvalde has experienced an unspeakable and senseless violence, and the community is undoubtedly still traumatized and processing grief," said Fr. Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension.

"It is our goal, that through the spiritual accompaniment of religious sisters, the children and their families of Uvalde, Texas, feel God's presence, and are reminded that they are not forgotten or alone in the coming year and beyond," the priest said.

Catholic Extension also will dedicate funds to support ongoing mental health programs to augment existing services as needed, with the help of Catholic counselors.

Since its founding in 1905, Catholic Extension's mission has been to build up Catholic faith communities in underserved regions by raising funds to help these communities. It helps construct churches in U.S. mission dioceses, many of which are rural and cover a large geographic area. Many have limited personnel and pastoral resources.

Besides Uvalde, Catholic Extension has supported 1,400 other church communities in rural Texas and along the U.S.-Mexico border.