

# Commitment and creativity land SVP 'Mini Vinnies' the Speaker's Award

The enthusiasm of children can be infectious. Young people have a capacity to spread joy to others and enthuse those who come into contact with them. The enthusiasm and commitment of one group of primary school children won them the Speaker's School Council Award, an initiative of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

The children, from St Mary's RC Primary School in Hexham, are all part of the school's 'Mini Vinnie' group – a branch of the Catholic charity, the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) made up of children aged 7-11 years old, who 'turn faith into action' by doing good works for their local community.

On 6th July they visited the House of Commons to collect their award, which was for raising funds for a local hospice.

The good work of St Mary's Mini Vinnies is part of a long string of success stories. Last year the Mini Vinnies liaised with the adult SVP at their parish church to raise funds for their fellow school pupil who suffers from a condition called SMA. They raised funds to provide the pupil with a new mobility bike – making a huge difference to the child's life.

This year the Mini Vinnies at St Mary's Primary School went a step further. They heard about the valuable work being done by Tynedale Hospice, a local hospice which provides nursing care for people who are terminally ill and bereavement support for children, adults and families in Tynedale, West Northumberland and Ponteland.

When a member of staff from the hospice visited the school to explain how the home provides care for people who are very ill and their families, the Mini Vinnies were extremely moved and could immediately relate to the work done by the hospice in supporting other children.

So touched were the children by the presentation and what they heard that they asked to visit the hospice to see its work for themselves. This was arranged, and when the children saw the 'Rainbow Room', a facility to support bereaved children in particular, a seed of action was planted.

The Hospice's Rainbow Room needed resources such as story books, art materials, soft furnishings and music to enable bereaved children to have a warm, welcoming and secure environment in which they can be supported. The Mini Vinnies saw the need, and leaped into action.

A Tynedale Hospice spokesperson said: "Although Tynedale Hospice offers a lot of services, the decision to support the Rainbow Room made particular sense as it resulted in children helping other children. Speaking with staff and visiting the Rainbow Room served to broaden the minds of our children and has helped develop their ability to empathise with the great needs of other children in their locality."

Having decided to fundraise for the hospice's Rainbow Room, the SVP Mini Vinnies decided that they should hold a sponsored event for all the children in the school. They worked in groups to come up with varied and exciting activities which would inspire the whole school to participate. From the ideas they came up with, the SVP Mini Vinnies then selected their favourite activities and planned where, how and when each activity would take place, devising sponsorship forms and gathering the necessary equipment.

A whole school assembly was planned where the SVP Mini Vinnies outlined the good works of the hospice and the reason the Rainbow Room had been chosen as a focus for fundraising. The SVP Mini Vinnies then explained each fundraising event idea and how their fellow pupils could get involved. The assembly was attended by representatives from Tynedale Hospice, the local parish SVP group, staff and parents. It was a huge success.

After all the planning and hard work the day of the event finally arrived. Children throughout the school were



The proud Mini Vinnies from St Mary's in the Speaker's Apartments of the House of Commons

excited and filled with anticipation. Each pupil had chosen an activity from a prepared ideas list which included activities as diverse and fun as holding a singing note for as long as possible, writing their name as many times as possible in two minutes while blindfolded, putting on as many jumpers as possible in two minutes, and participating in an obstacle course.

All the children had collected sponsorship from family and friends and had great pleasure in taking part in

## About the Mini Vinnies

To learn more about the Mini Vinnies, SVP and other Young Vincentian Programmes, call 0207 703 3030, visit [www.svp.org.uk](http://www.svp.org.uk), or email [info@svp.org.uk](mailto:info@svp.org.uk).

the Rainbow Room Sponsored Event. The enthusiasm of the children was clear. Mia, an SVP Mini Vinnie aged 8 said: "I wanted children to be happy. Raising money for the Rainbow Room can make a difference to a child like me." Karina, also aged 8, said: "I know what it feels like when someone I love dies. I think it is nice to cheer them up."

The success of the Rainbow Room Sponsored Events day resulted in £844 being raised for the hospice. Hospice director Alison Hands said: "The St Mary's SVP Mini Vinnies are a superb example of young people working together to make a difference in the community in which they and their families live. They form the next generation of our society which is increasingly dependent on the goodwill of others."

The hospice was so delighted and overawed by the children's commitment and dedication to this self-initiated project they felt compelled to write to their local MP, Guy Opperman, to say how proud and grateful they were to these young school pupils. In the letter they explained not only how the money raised would make a difference to the Rainbow Room and bereaved children, but also how the children's

commitment to the project raised awareness of the hospice and its work.

As a result, the school was encouraged to enter for the National Speaker's School Council Award in the 8-11 age group. The award recognises young people who work together to inspire others or make a difference. The SVP Mini Vinnies entered and won!

Children from the Mini Vinnies were invited to the House of Commons, and on 6th July attended a special award ceremony. They were given a tour of the Palace of Westminster and were presented with their trophy by MP Valerie Vaz in the Speaker's Apartments.

Young Vincentian development officer Sarah Taylor said: "One of our primary aims for this project was to empower the children to use their own initiative to plan a fundraising event. This was an opportunity for them to put their skills and creativity into practice. The award ceremony was the perfect chance to celebrate the achievements of each child in the group thus serving as a morale boosting exercise and a means of building the children's self-esteem."

Sarah continued: "The children's enthusiasm clearly rubbed off on the teachers and parents, who were equally as delighted and excited to be part of such an event. The whole project truly served to bring the St Mary's family together. Everyone shared the vision of the Mini Vinnies. Their conviction and inspirational ideas helped them to win the Speaker's Award."

SVP Mini Vinnies form the youngest apostolate of the SVP's Young Vincentian programmes. Like the adult SVP members they turn concern into action by doing good works for people in need. Mini Vinnies apply their faith in practical ways, such as teaming up with local parish adult SVP groups to visit isolated older people in residential homes, making cards and gifts for older parishioners, collecting food for hungry families, and doing other such good works for their local community.

The St Mary's Mini Vinnies in Hexham are one of 345 such groups across England and Wales, and form part of the Young Vincentian spectrum of programmes for children aged 7-18.



Taking in the sights: outside the Houses of Parliament, with Big Ben in the background