

What we have taught Tommy and what Tommy has taught us

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When we read about a child being threatened by a stranger, we relate to that child and that child's family on a certain level. But when that child, that family, is "close to home," their predicament is perceived with a new intensity, a more personal meaning that affects us more deeply. The situation urges us to reach out with our support and renew our efforts to help keep all children safe.

Tommy is that child who is "close to home" for us as a diocese. On Jan. 11 there was an attempted, but unsuccessful abduction of young Tommy in Arlington. Tommy knew what to do when he was approached by the abductor. He ran away.

Tommy was able to keep himself safe. When he was asked by his parents, school officials and law enforcement authorities how he knew what to do, he answered, "I learned it in Church religion class and Cub Scouts."

"I learned it in Church religion class . . ." In 2007 the VIRTUS program for adults and children became the official safe environment program of the diocese. Since then the offices of Religious Education and Faith Formation, Catholic Schools, and Safe Environment have taken up and fulfilled the request of the bishop of the Diocese of New Ulm to foster a safe environment in our Church for our children and youth. They have incorporated into their curriculums VIRTUS' Protecting God's Children, Touching Safety Program for Children. Through the efforts of the DREs, catechists, principals, teachers, and school staff in our diocese, the faith environment of each of our parishes and schools has become a safer environment for our children and youth.

It was the Church – you and I and all of us together as Church – that taught and continues to teach Tommy and all of our children what to do to be safe. We can be so grateful that our efforts to educate through the

VIRTUS program have been able to bear the fruit they have – that each of our parishes provides not only a living faith environment, but also a safe environment. This is because of the lessons taught in our school and religious education curriculums, as well as through the Safe Environment adult training given to all employees and volunteers who have unsupervised contact with children and youth.

Our commitment to our safe environment program is grounded in all that the Church teaches on the dignity of each human person and the way we should model a Christ-like love, compassion, and caring for those we encounter. This commitment leads us to structure our church and school environments and activities to protect against threats to the safety of our children and youth.

The VIRTUS program has helped save one child and one family from tragedy and pain. It

VIRTUS training sessions *(for adults)*



March 8

St. John Education Center
(Hwy. 12, west of Cokato)
at 6 p.m.

March 10

Church of St. Francis,
Benson at 7 p.m.

Contact parish to register.

has and deserves to continue to be our committed response as Church to the human suffering of child abuse.