

# FOCUS ON: *lifespan learning*

## Saskatoon kids are coming of age

**It wasn't your** typical Friday night youth event – i.e. no pizza and no movies. Instead, a dozen kids were invited to catch a mysterious bus from city hall to their imaginary “Hogwarts” destination (for you Muggles, that's the boarding school in the Harry Potter stories), at the house of organizer Liz James. Once there, they participated in a great feast, a spiritual quest, and a week-end-ful of classes, challenges and games.

The objective was to cement the connection these 12–15 year-olds felt towards this year's Coming of Age program at the Unitarian Congregation of Saskatoon. “It was very exhilarating,” says James, who coordinated the 40 volunteers who helped stage the Hogwarts weekend. Carl von Baeyer, who leads the overall program, states point-blank that, “it was the best youth event I've ever seen.”

Why go to so much trouble for a week-end event attended by a dozen kids? According to Saskatoon Director of Re-



*Coming of Age participants are invited to Hogwarts for the initiation weekend; they had to quiz their way by the knight, below in order to fulfill their Vision Quest.*

ligious Education Laura McNaughton, “It's the age when kids, especially boys, stop coming to church. Coming of Age teaches them to be members of our congregation, and it's a bridge to the youth group.”

The program started with the Hogwarts retreat in October, continued bi-weekly on Friday nights throughout the winter, and concluded with a week-end, out-of-town retreat in April. It was organized around these five themes:

- leadership skills
- relationships and sexuality
- developing a personal credo
- worship and ritual
- facing challenges (physical, social, emotional)

In addition to the bi-weekly sessions, each of the kids was paired with an adult mentor, a source of support that was neither parent-child nor friend-friend. Each pair chose their own activities, everything from sports, to travelling, cooking, playing games or volunteering – at least a couple of times per month.

The bigger aim of Coming of Age is to usher the children into adulthood – “a ceremonial, or rite of passage function,” according to von Baeyer. He equates it to a confirmation class in a Christian faith. There's no bible study here, but the heart of it for some kids are the three sessions led by Rev. Frances Deverell, on developing a personal religious credo.

Carl von Baeyer has two children of his own who've experienced the Coming of Age program in Saskatoon. “They're more mature, confident and committed to the church because of it,” he says.

The medium-size congregation, which has 45 children enrolled in its Sunday RE programs, can't run the Coming of Age program every year, but they now hope to offer it every second year. “The future of our congregation depends on it,” says McNaughton.

For more about Saskatoon's program, go to [www.ucsaskatoon/coa](http://www.ucsaskatoon/coa). 

