I WANT TO HELP PEOPLE because it feels good to see them smile,” said Gina Parks, a 30-year-old woman with a developmental disability. Parks is one of the 30 men and women who are part of the “Fight for the Right” Community Service Group, comprising adults from the Department for Persons with Disabilities (DPD) a Catholic Charities Agency in the Diocese of Paterson, N.J.

DPD provides assistance to 74 adults living in nine homes and two supervised apartments throughout northern New Jersey.

“DPD helps advocate for adults with developmental disabilities,” said Executive Director Scott Milliken. “The Fight for the Right group helps the community and tells other people that individuals with developmental disabilities can make a difference and have a lot to offer.”

Formed in October 2010, the group is facilitated by the agency’s behavior analyst Doreen Cook-Wottring and staff members Kelly O’Caiside and Mary Ellen Hokenberg. The group meets monthly to decide on and execute worthwhile community service projects. Members decide which projects are ultimately chosen.

“Every project we undertake is ultimately chosen by them,” said Cook-Wottring. “The logo and even the name of the group were selected by the people who live in our programs.”

A contest was held asking residents to submit names and create logos.

Projects the group has worked on include,
planting flowers at a local nursing home; running a pet product drive for a community pet adoption organization; donating 450 pounds of food to a local food bank; handcrafting, filling and donating Christmas stockings to a local social service agency; participating in the Houston Holocaust Museum’s Butterfly Holocaust Memorial Wall Project and writing letters and cards to American troops overseas for the holidays.

One of the first projects that the Fight for the Right Group completed was handcrafting centerpieces for the Community Soup Kitchen in Morristown.

“The beautiful centerpieces created by the Department of Persons with Disabilities group have brightened up the dining room of the Community Soup Kitchen and have made the many guests that we serve feel special,” said Marla Drury, director of development for the soup kitchen. “A big part of our mission is to treat everyone who comes through our doors with dignity and respect and make them feel comfortable at the Soup Kitchen.

“Anything extra-special that we can give our guests, like a comfortable place to enjoy their meal, and something interesting to adorn their table as they eat, goes a long way to making a difference in their lives.”

Gardening and landscaping

The Group’s favorite project seems to be volunteering at local Lakeside Residential Care Facility, just a few minutes away from DPD’s headquarters in Oak Ridge. Members sing for the residents of the nursing home and socialize with them. They also do gardening and landscaping projects outside of the facility.

“We planted 72 plants of impatiens and petunias in the front flower beds of the facility and enjoyed lemonade with the 13 ladies from Lakeside. It was hard work but was a lot of fun”, said group member Janet Burr.

The facility’s director, Miriam said, “Wow! This was so nice for us! Nobody has ever offered to do anything like this for us before! I am so proud of the Fight for the Right Group; they really showed that they can give back and do so fruitfully!”

“DPD is so fortunate to have support from the community. We have over 100 volunteers, a volunteer Board of Trustees and raise over $500,000 annually from donations.

“All of this support helps improve the lives of the people who live in our group homes and who work in our vocational day program. The people who we serve are aware and in awe of all of these contributions.

They wanted to give back to society and show that they not only can receive but can also contribute”, said DPD Development Director Chris Brancato.

The group hopes to expand and plans to invite new members from the community to join. They plan to run future food drives and pet product drives, would like to do more for troops overseas and for people in need nationally and globally.

“The sky’s the limit,” said group member Kaleigh O’Halloran.

To learn more about the Fight for the Right Group or the Department for Persons with Disabilities, contact DPD Development Director Chris Brancato at 973.406.1104 or e-mail him at Chrisb@dpd.org; or visit DPD on the web and “Like” them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/dpdcc.