Teen’s documentary shows plight of India’s ‘untouchables’

CAMP HILL, Pa. (CNS)—Imagine living a life deprived of basic human rights. You live in squalor, are subjected to forced labor and violence, and have little or no access to sufficient nutrition, running water, electricity or sanitation.

Now imagine that your chances of changing your situation are slim because society denies you the right to an education, the right to possess assets and the right to improve yourself socially or economically.

For many, this picture is impossible to comprehend. But for some 240 million men, women and children in India, these conditions are a harsh reality.

They are known as dalits, or “untouchables,” labeled by their society as unworthy of belonging to India’s four-level caste system. Without education, affirmation and opportunity, most who are born dalits will die dalits. It has been that way for more than 3,000 years.

The situation of the dalits, who account for nearly 25 percent of their country’s population, is something a 17-year-old student at Camp Hill High School wants to make better known.

Andy McCoy, a member of Good Shepherd Parish in Camp Hill, spent two weeks this winter assisting dalits in India and visiting refugee camps established for people devastated by the tsunami in December.

He used the mission trip to film several hours of footage depicting the destruction, disease and death left in the wake of the natural disaster for a documentary, “Tsunami Smiles,” to educate others about the dalits’ struggles and resiliency.

“I’m hoping to let people—especially students—know the conditions that others live in, and show them what they can do to help alleviate those problems,” McCoy said in an interview with The Catholic Witness, newspaper of the Diocese of Harrisburg, after he showed his video during a March assembly at his school.

He explained at the assembly that even though India outlawed the caste system nearly 50 years ago, society has continued to live by it. Violence against dalits by other members of society has increased dramatically over the past decade in an effort to discourage the increasing amount of human rights efforts there, he noted.

McCoy, a junior, traveled to India earlier this year as part of a mission group associated with Dalit Solidarity, an organization dedicated to providing dalits with education, health care, employment training and social development.

Also on the trip were Father Benjamin Chinnappan, a former chaplain at Holy Spirit Hospital in Camp Hill; Father Devasagaya Raj, who served in the Harrisburg Diocese at St. Patrick Parish in Carlisle during the summer of 2002; and McCoy’s brother, Matt, a 2004 graduate of Trinity High School in Camp Hill. Matt McCoy now teaches English at a school in India.

Father Chinnappan founded Dalit Solidarity six years ago. The priest, who now ministers as a chaplain in Chicago and visits India twice a year, said the Harrisburg Diocese’s Mission Co-op and Cursillo movement have donated funds to help build two schools and a seminary in Father Chinnappan’s home diocese, the Archdiocese of Pondicherry and Cuddalore, India.

McCoy’s documentary shows extensive footage of St. Patrick Home, a boarding school that Dalit Solidarity established four years ago to provide education, spiritual formation and psychological support for dalit children, who include Christians, Hindus and Muslims.

Dalit Solidarity also established St. Mary’s Medical Center, a rural hospital that assists people in about 30 villages. There, doctors and nurses provide 24-hour care and teach people standard first aid.†