



Alleman Catholic High School
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www.allemanhighschool.org

Riders in the Storm

Two Alleman students, Fr. Chase part of busload in 22-hour standstill in blizzard on the turnpike while returning from March for Life trip in D.C.

Two Alleman girls went on the March for Life trip to support a cause they believed in and deepen their faith. But it turned out they got that and a whole lot more...



This bus, which carried two Alleman students and Fr. Chase, was stranded for 22 hours on Pennsylvania Turnpike.



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Stranded on the Interstate for 22 hours in the middle of snowstorm would seem like a frightful challenge to most people. But for Alleman Catholic High School senior Maria Do and freshman Athena Fenn, it was more like the time of their life.

The two girls were part of a St. Mary's Moline contingent that included Alleman chaplain Fr. Chase Hilgenbrinck that was returning from the March for Life in Washington D.C. the same weekend the massive snowstorm that hit our nation's capitol.

But Fr. Chase, who also is an assistant at St. Mary's, had his bus ready to beat the storm. His plan was once snow started falling in Washington D.C., the group would exit the March early, ride the Metro and meet their bus driver outside the city in Maryland and be on their way. They would not have to even mess with Washington D.C. traffic, he figured.

Ah, the best laid plans ...

What happened after they got on the highway was first an accident, and then far up ahead a semi jackknifed on a mountain road, blocking the path of other semis that were behind it.

It was the same mountain road that the bus was to take in a few miles. However, the semi and other trucks could not move as the snow mounted and they had to be towed away to clear the route. That led officials to stopping traffic on the flatter part of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, Fr. Chase said.

In turn that backed up traffic for 100 miles. Estimates were as high as 500 vehicles were stopped in traffic on the turnpike. The St. Mary's bus was actually having no trouble when the bus got stopped, as there was just an inch or two of snow on



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the ground. Pictures would later show lots of snow, Fr. Chase said, because the bus had been stranded so long in the middle of a blizzard. The end result was they had to dig out the bus when it finally was able to go.

The bus may have been stopped for 22 hours, but its passengers were not in fear, Maria Do and Athena Fenn said.



Kids actually went sledding while they were stranded.

“I really wasn’t nervous about it because Fr. Chase said everything would be OK,” Maria said. Plus she could see the National Guard and firefighters outside her window, taking care of people.

“I really wasn’t scared,” Athena said. “Really, neither were any of the other kids. We really had a fun time. It was a cool experience.”

Stranded in a bus on the highway, Fr. Chase pointed out, is simply not like being stranded 20 years ago.

‘They were having the time of their life. We didn’t suffer.’ Fr. Chase

“We were on a bus. The kids had Wi-Fi,” Fr. Chase explained. “They had AC outlets. We never ran out of power on our phones. They had movies and games.”



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There was even a guitar on the bus and riders took their turn in Karaoke. “The kids were out making snow angels in the Interstate,” Fr. Chase said. “They were having the time of their life. We didn’t suffer.”

There were plenty of snacks and water and eventually pizza. With the bus running, there was also plenty of heat.

Eventually they even got to go outside and do some sledding on plastic sledding sheets some on the bus had, Athena said.

On a trip that was pretty much good the entire way, getting stranded “was the funnest part,” Athena said. “It was just so cool and unexpected, too.”

Fr. Chase called the whole scenario “providence.”

“It’s kind of one of those unexpected experiences that you make the most of that can be a great experience for everybody,” he said.

The Alleman girls did not disagree.

“It was just fun to bond with other people and meet people,” Athena said. But it was definitely a trip that exceeded expectations.



Athena Fenn

“I went maybe expecting to gain more knowledge but really nothing else besides that,” Athena said. “I was super happy at what I got out of it. First, I got more knowledge. But being able to see a bunch of people gather in D.C. for the March, it really showed me how much of an issue this is and how we have a big impact on it. And how if we kept doing things like this how it would change the law.”

And being stranded just added to everything she said.



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Maria, who was making her second trip to the March, said she was busy on her cellphone texting and talking to friends and family throughout the Iowa, Illinois and Michigan and even places like Vietnam and France. Her parents were following things back home on national TV news shows and feared her bus had been in an accident. Thanks to her cellphone, she was able to talk to them and calm them down. She also shared her phone with other people who wanted to contact their friends, as news reports had many fearful back home.



Maria Do

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Athena called the trip “a once in a lifetime experience.”

Maria’s parents were relieved to pick her up back at St. Mary’s. She understood. But after the one hour spent in the March, then 22 hours being stranded on the highway, plus another 10 hours-plus of travel time after that, she was exhausted.

She celebrated her homecoming by simply going to bed and sleeping.

Both girls remember the whole bus cheering as their trip back home finally resumed.

“It was pretty good,” Athena said of having the bus start to move. “It was pretty smooth. We had to turn back around. We were driving past other buses that were stuck ... 8 to 10 miles of other buses, cars and semis that were stuck...”



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Maria remembered that one of the messages of the March was every life is a gift. Athena noted that the storm's name was Jonas, which means gift from God.

"So it was kind of cool how it all worked out with the March for Life and then the Jonas Blizzard," Athena said.

Her parents, too, were relieved when she returned home. "My mom was the most worried," she said. "But she didn't need to worry about it. It was fun. It was God's will so..."

■ **Alleman Alumni Relations Coordinator Jim Meenan**