





Leaving the 99 to search for the '1' is Christ's way

 Published on Wednesday, 07 December 2011 19:19 |  Written by Peter Finney Jr. |  

Ansel Augustine's life has come full circle, and now he is racing as fast as he can to share with teens the unvarnished realities of life as well as the wisdom he picked up from the aunt who reared him about overcoming hard knocks and fully living the Christian faith.

"My aunt's favorite quote used to be, 'Don't ask God to order your steps if you're not willing to move your feet,'" said Augustine, 34, the new director of Catholic Charities' Isaiah 43 program whose goal is to mentor kids and offer parenting classes to adults in hopes of stemming the cycle of violence in the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

Augustine, who also serves as associate director and coordinator of Black Youth and Adult Ministry for the CYO Office, has seen plenty in his young life, but he prefers not to talk much about it out of respect for others who have been through much worse.

Like so many "thousands of others," Augustine lost his home in Katrina, but he also experienced the deaths of 18 members of his extended family or close friends, including his girlfriend, who he thought had evacuated prior to the storm.

The death wrought by Katrina six years ago is not something Augustine enjoys exposing to the world, but it's a part of his life, and it's one of the reasons he agreed to be interviewed by Catholic authors Michael Novak and William E. Simon Jr. in their book, "Living the Call: An Introduction to the Lay Vocation."

Augustine's suffering has had a purpose. It has produced in him a fertile heart. As he soaks in the pain of others, he responds with bountiful wisdom, because he's been there.

"Really, you never know what someone's going through from the outside," Augustine said. "Even though someone might be having a bad day or a bad time because of their circumstances, nine times out of 10, a person is genuinely good. I believe that about everybody. With the proper support and understanding and with nonjudgmental love, as Jesus asks us to treat one another, I think you can break down barriers."

It was only a few weeks after Katrina that Augustine found out about his girlfriend's death. He was in the midst of helping clean the muck out of St. Peter Claver Church. "Pews were tossed around, and that's when I first really started crying because that was my place of worship – that was my home," Augustine said. "You couldn't believe something like that could happen in such a holy place, but that's when I really said, 'Lord, this is your house, and I put it in your hands.'"

The human cost of Katrina simply steeled him in his commitment to serve.

"When you reflect on it, it all still feels like a bad dream," Augustine said. "As it was going on and I was losing everything and everyone at once, I was stressed out. I was helping Father Mike (Jacques) rebuild the church, and I was living from place to place or on the street – wherever. It was rough. I felt like, 'This can't be happening. I think I'll wake up the next morning and everything's going to be normal.'" It wasn't.

Ansel J. Augustine, M.P.S. Shares Good News in Louisiana's Clarion Herald

"I guess that's part of the motivation of doing what I did because most of the people I lost were church-connected people or family that had faith," Augustine said. "And so, I do what I do for them. They are my inspiration. When I get tired, I know they're up in heaven sitting alongside the Lord, looking down on all of us here."

That's why Augustine believes the Isaiah 43 mentoring and parenting program will help bring peace to a violence-torn region. He is working with Deacon Steve Ferran and Stuart Young, a former mediator in the Catholic-Protestant disputes in Northern Ireland, to make it work.

Through Augustine's interaction with kids in parish youth ministry, he has seen his presence make a difference. The difficulty now is getting to the kids most at risk – the ones who haven't walked through a church door in, maybe, forever.

"This is why I've signed on," Augustine said. "What we're called to do as Christians and as Catholics is to reach out to those who may not be in the 'fold' and bring them in. I think of the parable about the shepherd who leaves the 99 to chase the one. You know, there are plenty of 'ones' out there."

Those "ones" won't be reached by putting a notice in the church bulletin. The church will have to leave the 99 to find them where they are.

"We have to let them know they are good," Augustine said. "We have to tell them, 'You might be hearing every negative thing out there from everybody else, but you are good and God loves you.' And then the barriers start breaking down and they start seeing there's some self-worth inside them. They start acting differently in the way they treat themselves and others." And then, God willing, they will move their feet.

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