

NJDC Chapel to Close May 25, 2014

After 36 years of Ministry to the residents of the North Jersey Developmental Center, today I received notice from Husan Abdallah, CEO, that the Chapel will close May 25, 2014. The NJDCenter will close July 1. At that time all of the residents will have been moved to other State facilities.

Let me share some history with you.

I had been assigned by Bishop Frank J. Rodimer to the "Newman House" at William Paterson College, Wayne, NJ in 1978. Within 6 months the name of the ministry was changed to the Catholic Campus Ministry Center. At that time, Fr John Wherlan was Chaplain at NJDC. He recommended me as his successor. I received a call from the CEO....and not knowing what I was getting myself into, said yes, I would offer Mass...and bring some college students with me to play music!

We entered the full chapel....over 100 residents, in various states of disability. Some were speaking very loudly, some walking around, some dribbling, some half asleep....I thought: "my God, why am I here....why are they here!!! I was distraught...what could we do with these people....did they even know I was there! Why bother...'serving' them...." (I was naïve and ordained 5 years....how could this be my ministry, I thought)....then it happened!

The Holy Spirit was with Evelyn as she played the music for mass....I still recall "I WILL NEVER FORGET YOU MY PEOPLE; I HAVE CARVED YOU IN THE PALM OF MY HAND".

I was humbled beyond my own imagination...."THESE ARE GOD'S PEOPLE...."and I have been sent to serve them....

That was the beginning....

Within 2 weeks we were bringing about 10 students to the Center on Sundays, then within a few weeks, working with the William Paterson Special Ed. majors and Catholic Campus Ministry Students we began "religious ed" classes, first in the Chapel then in the NJDC school building. This continued and grew, the "residents" were our friends, brothers and sisters. Many of the CCMC students switched their majors and became Special Ed. Majors. Our Music Ministry grew, the Fraternities and Sororities joined us with the religious education classes. They

brought donuts, refreshments, entertainment. We knew the "residents" by name. We had special events: birthday parties, Christmas parties, trips.

Many students "adopted" a NJDC friend and brought them to campus and eventually to our Masses at the Chapel. We celebrated First Communions, Confirmations and the CCMC-NJDC community grew and grew. We commemorated funerals for deceased residents in the Chapel as well as in the cottages. NJDC was a living vital community made up of dedicated workers and God's very special people! That was for sure!

A classic story: one of the students, Barbra, who was our NJDC rep from the Catholic Campus Ministry, asked me for rosaries for the residents. I immediately contacted St Philomena's Rosary Makers, Livingston, who sent me 100 rosaries. I gave them to Barbra. She then asked me for instructions as to how to say the Rosary. I was surprised, and expressed it, but was willing to teach her. She responded "you shouldn't be surprised that I don't know how to say the Rosary....I am Jewish!" Our Ministry to NJDC was ecumenical!

Another beautiful event took place when Bishop Rodimer came to the NJDC Chapel to celebrate mass. The Chapel was packed! Bishop had asked my suggestion as to his vestments. I asked him to wear the mitre and carry the crosier so the residents would recognize him. During the homily he asked "does anyone know who I am?" I was embarrassed by the silence. Then Pauline stood up and said: "Yes, I know who you are....you are a shepherd with a staff, you are Little Bo Peep!" Ever the pastor and Shepherd, Bishop took that line and preached about the Love of the Good Shepherd for all of His people!

Through the years as residents moved to Group Homes we would have a going away ceremony after Mass and bid them farewell with a crucifix for their new 'rooms' .Last year it was publically announced that the NJDC would close, along with other facilities and that the residents would be sent to other locations. There has been a sadness in the air, at the Chapel and in the cottages since the announcement.

Today the letter came regarding the final date....May 25, 2014 that the Chapel would close...

We pray for the many residents we have been honored and blessed to serve....and the memories that they have given us. I also thank the many William Paterson University students who served through the decades.....

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