

ALS taking away a lot but not his Catholic faith

written by Dwain Hebda |



When a reporter first reached Bill Conway, it was on a good day — one where the 79-year-old felt up to talking, however briefly. A day when he felt like making plans for a follow-up conversation to discuss in more detail a life poured into his parish and community. Recognizing his speech, ravaged by a daily waltz with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, commonly called Lou Gehrig's Disease, made the words foggy compared to the crystal clear convictions behind them, he signed off with the following summation.

"Lou Gehrig's Disease," he said, "takes everything but your mind."

The next conversation was not a good day. So it is with ALS, a disease so mysterious that only 10 percent of sufferers can trace its cause to genetics. The other nine out of 10 are left to wonder, amid the slowly fading neurons that no longer fire messages from the brain to muscles, what brought this condition to their door.

Bill Conway is not one of those people. Communicating through e-mail, he said, "I have never thought 'Why me?' God gives you a gift, it is up to you to figure out how he wants you to use it. "I think I have figured it out. He wants me to bring new life to my church, my community and my county."

There aren't many who would describe a terminal and incurable disease as a gift. For that matter, neither would many see McGehee as such, but as a 4,200-person speck in the Arkansas Delta from which people and hope have been steadily draining like water from the local ricefields after winter's flooding. And truth be told, most wouldn't be particularly overwhelmed by St. Mary Church, it having dwindled to 56 souls and one Mass a week.

Again, Conway is not most people.

"I would say a key part of Bill's contribution is his optimism," said Father Erik Pohlmeier, pastor of Our Lady of the Holy Souls Church in Little Rock who was pastor of St. Mary Church from 2001-2005 and who married Bill and his second wife, Helen. "He takes great pride in his adopted town and his small parish. In an area where there is great concern about the future he is very positive both in word and deed."

Raised in the Bronx, N.Y., Conway has spent the past quarter century as a living example of what even a single heart, ignited by faith, can accomplish. Through the years he has served as

organist, Knights of Columbus member and chairman of the parish finance council. Among the things of which he is most proud has been keeping St. Mary Church, “a financially stable Catholic island in a Baptist sea.”

Working within his tiny mission church, Conway long ago recognized inclusiveness equals survival. To that end, he has found an effective means of merging his love of community with love of the Church through Southeast Arkansas Home Rehabilitators, a mission St. Mary Church launched in 1996.

“Our facility at St. Mary’s is a safe place to bring mission groups for prayer, work and communion with God,” he said. “We use their hands and talents for restoration projects for low-income homeowners and for God’s houses of worship. Those who stay with us return home with an inspired and deeper relationship with God, their family and the community as a whole.”

Once involving an array of interdenominational clergy in McGehee, leadership in the group eventually distilled to just Conway, who still cross-pollinates mission groups with worthy projects yielding a singular hybrid community of grace.

“Last May, 64 Catholic youth and their leaders came to McGehee on a Friday for a one-day work project,” Conway said. “They painted the Chickasaw Baptist Church, a small rural church with only 15 members. It just gleams in the sun and can be seen for miles.

“The youth group from Holy Souls spent a week with us, and they painted the wheelchair ramp and windows at the Temple Meir Chayim. This allowed them to experience the roots of our faith.”

Father Pohlmeier said the mission’s survival is owed to Conway’s remarkable ability to build relationships.

“Bill brings people together that might not ever cross paths,” he said. “When Home Rehabilitators’ original workers moved away it could easily have folded up, but he wouldn’t let it. Since I’ve moved away, I have not stopped hearing of Catholic youth groups that have given and benefited from service under the organization of Bill Conway.”

The fact that much of what visiting groups do benefits houses of worship or residents not of their own faith teaches missionaries that true service isn’t something that’s reserved for members of one’s own group, but doing good for good’s sake. It’s a lesson that cuts across generations too.

“It’s not just the young,” Conway said. “Everyone has a job to do in spreading the faith. Don’t just sit in the pew; God has something for you to do.”

While Home Rehabilitators may reveal his idealistic heart, Conway suffers no illusions regarding his day-to-day condition. ALS will kill him. Yet he can’t help himself — somewhere in there, like his mind, are lessons God wants him to teach and learn.

“At the end of life, every deed, both good and bad, is placed before you and your God,” he said. “It is at once a terrifying and humbling experience. But at the same time you feel the immense love of God.

“When I go to my great-grandson’s football games, there are helping hands to assist me, every step of the way. I have learned to let people help me and to stop being so independent. I usually sit through church as it takes a whole lot of effort to stand up and people understand. Everything takes more than twice as long, but that is OK.

“The disease has strengthened my faith. I realize that the only thing you are buried with is your reputation. I am continually working to make it shine.”