

Teen candidate already living Catholic social justice

written by Dwain Hebda |



JACKSONVILLE — While it may not have become official until Easter Vigil, Anna Shelton has long been a Catholic at heart. The 16-year-old high school sophomore, the youngest member of her RCIA class at St. Jude Church in Jacksonville, has been willing to put her faith into action on behalf of the less fortunate, something that fits right in with the Church’s teaching on social justice.

“Deciding to become Catholic took a lot of praying,” she said. “It’s just made me realize that it was definitely something more that put me in this situation. Maybe it wasn’t my choosing, maybe I was put there for a reason.”

Shelton got a taste of the Church when she was young by attending Mass with her mother Judy, who is non-practicing Catholic. But even though that attendance dwindled to nothing, she found another routine that displayed a love of Christ and a concern for others that puts many regular churchgoers to shame.

Beginning around age 12, the honor student and musician has been a regular volunteer with Fishnet Missions, a Jacksonville ministry feeding the hungry. In those four years, she and her father Eugene have spent their Saturday mornings cooking breakfast at the mission and then transporting and serving the food to the homeless camped out under the Broadway Bridge joining North Little Rock and Little Rock.

“I’m really interested in helping that category of people because they are out there and they all have a story and a reason, and I’m interested sometimes in knowing why,” she said. “It just all has to do with curiosity and just trying to find a way to maybe for a moment make their life a little bit better by having a warm breakfast. Anything to give them a second where they don’t have to think about it, that’s just kind of cool to me.”

She's been doing it so long she doesn't even stop to think how remarkable it is to picture a 12-year-old kid willingly rolling out of bed at 5 a.m., soon to be face to face with a population not many people ever have the chance to come in contact with, or actively avoid.

"I just get up and do it, it's just kind of usual," she said, nonchalantly. "It's just kind of what I do."

Shelton knows exactly the kind of dangers that exist among the homeless population, and in the world at large for that matter. Showing up week after week she sees familiar faces, but she suffers no illusions of where she is and what she's doing.

"I'd say that there is a little bit of an emotional barrier sometimes just to kind of protect myself," she said. "But that doesn't stop me from talking to them in the line you know, 'Good morning, how are you, how have you been? We didn't see you last week.' That kind of stuff.

"We mainly see the older people because the younger people will usually be put into shelters because they are children. But I have seen more children than I'd like to see down there. I try to take a little extra care of them, give them a whole lot of milk, try to make them feel better, give them the nutritional stuff down there."

Shelton began developing a deeper interest in joining the Church a couple of years ago. The survival of ancient Catholic traditions, intact through the centuries, fascinates her. As she came back to Mass, she started getting the occasional hint from God that he was leading her to be Catholic. Her parents told her the choice of religion was hers alone to make.

"My mom was so happy," she said. "My dad definitely supports it a lot. He takes me to church all the time."

She's also found a new circle of friends among the youth at St. Jude and even though she hadn't yet achieved full standing in the Church, she began to feel what it meant to be Catholic in her daily life at Cabot High School.

"I'm in a civics class and we talk a lot about our rights and that's also the class that actually has the most of us Catholics in there, there's four of us," she said. "Whenever we'll talk about the death penalty or abortion we're just squirming. I mean, the other day they were talking about what they should do to people with the death penalty. It was terrifying.

"I'm not afraid to say what I want to say. I'm definitely confident enough to speak up and I do, a lot. It's just sometimes difficult because the teachers don't believe the exact same way we do and so it's a little intimidating, but I've kind of gotten over that. My beliefs aren't something I just carry on Sunday, this is what I live."