

# Catholic faith a front runner in Oaklawn Park backstretch

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



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HOT SPRINGS — The stable area at Oaklawn Park houses racehorses — and a large population of Catholics.

They are the caretakers of the runners who put on the show each December through May, and some of their spiritual needs are being met by parishes in Arkansas and Texas.

Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Hot Springs Village and St. Francis of Assisi Church in Grapevine, Texas, regularly supply the Arkansas Racetrack Chaplaincy program at Oaklawn Park with Catholic items like Bibles, rosaries, scapulars, medals, books, framed pictures and prayer cards.

“We always bring any kind of religious articles,” Sheila Harrison, a member of Sacred Heart of Jesus, said. “The workers appreciate something to remind them of who they are and why they’re here.”

Rich Heffington and his wife, Robi, serve as the chaplains at Oaklawn Park. They estimated about 40 to 50 percent of the 900 people working in the stable area, or backstretch, are Catholic. The chaplaincy program is non-denominational, but the Heffingtons take great care to serve the track's Catholics.

"We are here to promote the Lord Jesus Christ," Rich Heffington said.

At the start of each Oaklawn Park season, Robi Heffington puts on a popular women's luncheon. At one of the first events, she noticed how quickly the participants picked up blessed scapulars sent from members of a prayer group at St. Francis in Texas.

"I had put a table out with literature and different things and had put some of the (scapulars) out, and they snapped them up," Robi Heffington said. "I caught on to the fact that I obviously need to have a lot of Catholic things. Prayer cards, rosary beads, anything like that."

The Heffingtons and Harrison communicate regularly, with Harrison working to fulfill any special Catholic requests from the chaplaincy. One of those requests was for Catholic Bibles in Spanish, Harrison said. Sacred Heart of Jesus parishioners provided those, and also Catholic Bibles in English.

"It's important," said Robi Heffington. "The ladies in my Bible study, half of them are Catholic."

"I love the fullness of the Catholic Bible," added Rich Heffington.

The Heffingtons, in their commitment to Catholics, have also worked with Father George Sanders, pastor of St. John the Baptist in Hot Springs, and his predecessor, the late Father James West.

Harrison has been a friend of the chaplaincy for about 15 years.

"I love horses. That's how I got involved in the racetrack," she said. "I like to see them run.

"I have the greatest admiration for Rich and Robi and what they're doing."

Harrison and members of the Ladies of Sacred Heart also seek to take care of some of the temporal needs of those in the stable area at Oaklawn Park.

"Beginning in October or November, depending on what our schedule looks like, we just ask for donations for gently used clothing, like jeans, sweaters, jackets," Harrison said. "We're looking for warm clothing for the workers. They're coming in from other tracks and because a lot of them travel with the horses from track to track, they need additional clothing. A big thing is socks, so they can change socks several times a day because their feet are wet from taking care of the horses."

The chaplaincy building located near the stable entry at Oaklawn Park has an area where clothing and household items are offered to the 300 who live on the backstretch.

"It's available for any workers to come in and pick whatever they need," Harrison said.

The Ladies of Sacred Heart also team with about five other churches in Hot Springs Village to provide gift bags filled with bathroom items like soaps, scarves, jewelry and devotional items for Robi Heffington's annual women's luncheon, Harrison said.

“Each bag includes a note from the donor to the lady who gets the bag that says they are praying for them to have a safe and successful meeting,” Harrison said.