

Making a Big Difference in Prison Ministry!

I have searched hard, yet no words exist to fully describe the physical and emotional unrest felt with the loss of freedom. The distinctive sounds (*clank!*) of the cell door closing, and suddenly there is no control or power over any situation. You find yourself in a space smaller than a standard master bathroom with a complete stranger for 22 (or more) hours a day, which can go on for many months or years with little relief.

If you're not already broken you soon will be, and left with an empty tank. I knew it was my actions (and inactions) that put me in this place, but what to do now? Do I curl up in a ball of self-pity and kill myself slowly with a bottle, pills, or depression? Do I strive to make it back to the old neighborhood and *show them*? Or, do I begin today to fill this empty tank with all the positives I had before, meanwhile replacing the *not so good* items with a new and improved version? Sounds like an easy decision, but the mountain looked extremely steep and far away.

I am here today because I made the decision to climb the mountain, and climb I did.

I began by tapping into every source of strength I could find, which is approximately when I walked into the Algoa Correctional Center Chapel looking for an inspirational book. It wasn't long before Chaplain Anderson asked me if I would be interested in working in the chapel. I expressed to him I was the wrong person for the Chapel, and that while I was raised and professing to be Catholic, that I was not a 'good' Catholic. I explained that I was very upset with everybody, especially myself, that I was not happy with God, and he would be better off finding someone else. His response was memorable, "NO, you are exactly the person I want working in the chapel. While you are working on refilling your tank, you can be helping a lot of men who could use your insight!" I reluctantly agreed to help, and it was one of the best decisions of my life.

I am reminded of a favorite quote of mine by Ralph Waldo Emerson, "It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life, which no person can sincerely try to help another without helping himself."

I soon became the Catholic Representative at Algoa. I started attending Mass on Saturday mornings with Fr. Pat, and the Legion of Mary on Monday evenings with Ms. Lois. The Chaplain gave me my first bible and one of the fellow chapel workers helped me realize the power of prayer. It was through meaningful prayer and our Christ-Centered chapel brotherhood that I became a true believer.

My home parish, Our Lady of Lourdes in St. Louis, started a letter writing campaign to show me love and support. I received over 300 letters from 125 different people in 18 months; letters of emotional support from people I knew well and others I barely knew at all. Their kindness and support offered me the strength I needed to increase my outreach and efforts for the chapel and the Catholic community.

Ms. Lois introduced me to the support from Catholic Charities of Central and Northern Missouri, whereby the Algoa Catholic community is allowed two food events each year sponsored by Catholic Charities. These greatly anticipated events each year provide the men with a rare glimpse of life outside the fences. If only for a couple hours, it helps to solidify a unique brotherhood and brings us all together in the Catholic faith. We also celebrate a special Mass and dinner with Fr. Pat and welcome our visitors from Catholic Charities and local parishes, which is truly special.

Last May, we enjoyed our delicious Bandana's BBQ catered event and it was a big success. Later in November, we celebrated Mass and shared our Canteen Food Event with 'Dan' and 'Jake' from Catholic Charities, resulting in the largest turnout in many years for this event! Thanks to the consistent support and spiritual mission of Catholic Charities, we are able to provide an evening where all can come together in the presence of our Lord and Savior.

On behalf of the men of Algoa and the chapels in corrections, I sincerely thank you for your support. We encourage everyone involved with Catholic Charities to attend these events so we can show our appreciation. You are making a real difference that offers a positive *ripple effect* throughout the camp and in the souls of these men.

Kevin M.

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