

Blind ambition

Young man overcomes disabilities to serve God

by KATIE MOORE

staff writer

DENVER — To an onlooker in a pew at Holy Spirit Church in Denver, Patrick Vellia looks like a typical altar server.

Holding the cross high, he leads the opening procession down the center aisle of the church with determination and poise.

That seemingly simple task is actually quite an accomplishment because unlike a typical altar server, Patrick is deaf and blind.

Originally from New York, Patrick, 21, was born blind and lost his hearing by the time he was 3.

His parents taught him a limited vocabulary before his hearing loss and, when he was 18 months old, he was enrolled in an early intervention program where he learned pre-Braille skills.

Now he utilizes finger spelling to communicate — a method by which Patrick uses his hands to feel the letters that are being signed to him.

The youngest of five children, Patrick began kindergarten at the Catholic school that his older sisters and brother attended, but, due to the separation of church and state, disability services could not be provided at the parochial school.

His mother, Patricia, remembers that time as a particularly tough period for their family.

“The biggest help of all was Christ in the Blessed Sacrament,” she said, recalling one instance in particular, when she sat in adoration and cried for more than an hour.

“I couldn’t pray, I couldn’t ask God what I needed. But he knew what I needed and he gave it to me,” she said.

The next day she remembered the name of a man who worked for the New York Commission for the Blind. He had visited the Vellias shortly after Patrick was born and told them to contact him if they ever needed help.

He arranged for Patrick to receive disability services at the public school and made plans for him to attend the Helen Keller National Center summer camp.

“I think his older siblings motivated him,” said his mother, because they never treated him like he was different.

In high school, Patrick took advanced placement classes so that he could earn an advanced diploma like his older siblings.

His mother said she was nervous on the day of his graduation when the ceremony was moved inside due to rain.

“He didn’t practice with those stairs,” she said.

When Patrick walked across the stage, everyone in the auditorium was on their feet.

“I graduated with the loudest standing ovation, but didn’t even notice,” he said with a laugh.

Guided by faith

“Because of his disabilities he is a very compassionate person,” said his mother.

At Holy Spirit Church, the parish has embraced Patrick in his role as altar server.

He seems perfectly comfortable in the role, although part of that could be attributed to his upbringing.

“I worked in the rectory for 11 years in New York,” said his mother. “He was always around the church.”

Patrick trained as an altar server when he was in sixth grade.

He likes serving because “it doesn’t put me to sleep like sitting in the pews,” he joked. Patrick uses a Braille missal from the Xavier Society for the Blind, which serves as the National Catholic Press and Lending Library for the visually impaired.

It helps him follow along during Mass, even though he said it can be hard to read the Braille while standing up.

He does get frustrated sometimes.

“What drives me crazy is that the choir won’t stay with the book,” he joked.

Father Carmen Malacari, pastor of Holy Spirit Church, told Patrick about the Xavier Society for the blind and their free service of providing Catholic reading materials in Braille.

Prior to that, when Patrick was serving as a lector at his parish in New York, he used to translate the readings to Braille and memorize them so he could recite them at Mass.

Looking to the future

Now, Patrick is in school at Central Piedmont Community College, where he has three interpreters to translate his classes.

One of the biggest challenges he faces these days is not being able to drive.

“I still have to rely on Mom and Dad to get to school unless I take the bus,” he said.

And although he currently is very focused on finishing his education, his mother said that on more than one occasion he has expressed an interest in becoming a priest.

In 2006, Patrick met Father Cyril Axelrod, the world’s only “deafblind” priest.

Father Axelrod is the pastoral support development coordinator for DeafBlind UK, a national charity offering specialist services and human support to deafblind people and those who have progressive sight and hearing loss. Patrick had read Father Axelrod’s autobiography and was inspired by his story, but he said meeting him in person was even more meaningful.

Patrick has always been very dedicated when it comes to his faith.

His mother recalled a time when Patrick went to Seattle for the summer on a scholarship for a computer science program. Within the first week he had found a Catholic church where he could attend Mass on Sundays.

“He told me, ‘Don’t worry,’” she said, ‘I have to go through the woods and cross over 49th street, but don’t worry — I have assistance.’”

He also found a nun at the parish who was able to interpret the Mass for him.

“People are surprised that he does as well as he does,” said his mother.

They are a lot of things about Patrick that may surprise people.

One that he is particularly proud of is that he currently holds a black belt in martial arts.

“He has really had to overcome a lot,” said Patricia. “I just pray so much because (God) has really brought us through.”

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