

Spreading peanut butter and friendship

Students at BSU's Labre Ministry seek not only to feed, but to make friends

by Emily Woodham
Staff Writer

BOISE – On All Saints Day, Nate Dewar and Josh Millet, freshmen at Boise State University, took a friend to Mass at St. Paul's Student Center on the BSU campus. They met their friend, "Big Mike," one Sunday afternoon while handing out small bags of food and water. He said he was not Catholic, but after talking to the young men each week over the last two months, he wanted to go to Mass.

The trio arrived 30 minutes early, and Big Mike, who looked like any other 30-something who loved spending time outdoors, seemed to be in another world. His kind eyes examined the religious paintings, and then he claimed to have personally met each saint depicted. He boasted of experiences that clearly never happened.

Dewar and Millet began to worry that Big Mike would have trouble getting through Mass, but as soon as the introductory rites began, he became calm.

"He knew all the prayers and the responses," Millet said. "He even knew all the words to the Creed." However, as they took him back to his "home" on the streets, Big Mike's sense of reality, once again, slipped away.

The two Boise State students, along with several others, are part of the Labre Ministry to the homeless.

Labre Street Ministry was started at St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland in 2002. Its name comes from Saint Benedict Joseph Labre, the patron saint for the homeless. Students in Cleveland took peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to the homeless and, in the process, formed friendships. A "scribe" took notes on each visit to help establish a lasting friendship and a readymade prayer list to pray for each person the students encountered. In the 18 years since the Cleveland,

Ohio high school students started the ministry, they have not missed one Sunday night visiting, befriending and praying for the homeless. The ministry has expanded across the nation.

Ryan Marshall, a freshman at BSU, is a graduate of the Cleveland high school where the Labre ministry was formed. He asked BSU Campus Minister Kyle Baker, S.J., if he could start Labre at Bronco Catholic. Baker, a scholastic with the Jesuits preparing the priesthood, readily agreed.

Marshall, Dewar, Nicholas Meneses and Charlie Wooler met with Baker in late August. They began with simple peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and bottles of water. They only encountered five people that first day. But after faithfully going out each Sunday, the numbers of volunteers and those to whom they minister have grown. They now spread out in two to three groups of four volunteers to feed around 20 to 30 people a week.

"We are not about ending hunger in Boise," Wooler said, pointing out that there are other organizations with that as their goal. "We want to instill within them a sense of worth. We're giving because we love. We want to lend a helping hand and show a loving face to the people on the streets in our community."

There is no judgement against those who are homeless nor the inability of some, like Big Mike, to always stay grounded. Instead, Dewar and Millet point out their friend's gratitude and generosity. "He even offered to give me his sunglasses when I gave him a compliment," said Dewar.

Big Mike is schizophrenic, but has an "easy smile and a positive outlook on life," Dewar said. "I was moved when the collection basket was passed around, and he frantically dug around in his pockets in an attempt to locate two of the presumably 12 dollars to his name. It was an incredible act of charity."

Seeing the homeless as having the same dignity as any other human being, no matter their illnesses or sins,

is a key foundation of Labre Street Ministry to the homeless. "Their sin is more visible because they're out in the streets, but that doesn't mean that we're better, or they're lesser, human beings. They still need human connection," said Wooler, a junior at BSU and a student-campus minister for Bronco Catholic.

So every Sunday since that first August meeting, volunteers meet at St. Paul's at 1 p.m. to prepare food (usually a sandwich, chips, a treat and a bottle of water) and essential supplies, such as gloves and socks. They pray together before going out into the streets in groups of about four in each group.

Each group takes a different route around Boise, driving to areas where the homeless congregate. Staying together, they each take a bag of food and walk up to individuals who look hungry. They ask if they want some food, and if



Charlie Wooler, center, a student campus minister at Boise State University, was instrumental in getting the Labre Ministry started at St. Paul Catholic Student Center in Boise. (ICR photo/Emily Woodham)

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--Ash Hemmersmeir, BSU campus minister

they say yes, then volunteers ask their names as they hand them a bag. Then they have a short conversation with each person, asking them how their week has been and how they are doing in general.

Each group has a scribe, who, after the visit, records the names and highlights of the conversations, in a phone app as the driver goes to the next destination. They return about two hours later to talk about what they experienced, going through the stories recorded by the scribes. They pray for each person they met, and each volunteer chooses a person to pray for during the week.

St. Paul's community members and other supporters have donated to help the cause and some have joined the students on their Sunday trips. Baker said some of the parents of the students have also volunteered. "One of my favorite things is the students really see how this is connected to living out their faith."

As the volunteers encounter and speak with the same people, they begin to know more about their stories. This is an essential part to realizing the dignity of the homeless.

"It has made my faith stronger," said Ash Hemmersmeir, a campus minister and freshman from Utah. "I have started to see more good in the people on the streets. I had the view that almost everyone who is on the streets was too lazy to get a job. But the reality is that most of them have jobs. They just can't afford housing," she said. "It's also interesting to see how they still have a lot of joy, which I didn't expect."

On All Saints Day on Nov. 1, volunteers met people from all walks of life. Jeff could not go back to his shelter because he didn't know the result of his COVID test. William's deep, erudite conversation gave no reason to doubt that he had graduated from Vanderbilt University decades ago. Ray selflessly took care of his sister who died from cancer, but he struggles with reality now. Shayla, a young woman who lost her job after an accident, told volunteers she was sure things would get better now that she finished her physical therapy. Her optimism is contagious as she struggles to put mittens

over her cold fingers.

Most of the homeless they meet are men, over the age of 30.

At some point in each of the conversations, without any prompting from the volunteers, God and faith are mentioned. Labre volunteers are careful not to push their faith, but the people bring up religion anyway. The homeless mention God as casually as they talk about the weather, a simple expression of faith not present in many more well-off Americans.

Labre Street Ministry at St. Paul's can be supported through donations (monetary or supplies) by going to brnccatholic.org and typing "Labre" in the information box, or emailing Baker at kyle@brnccatholic.org.

Members of the larger Catholic community are also welcome to join any Sunday when school is in session. They meet at 1 p.m. at St. Paul's on the BSU campus.

"I see God in the homeless," said Marshall, who is considering changing his major to social work. "It has impacted how I see everyone, how I treat everyone."



BSU students Zachary Butsch, left, and Nate Dewar, right, prepare sandwiches to take to Boise's homeless population on All Saints Day. They are volunteers with the Labre Ministry, based at St. Paul Catholic Student Center in Boise. (ICR photo/Emily Woodham)



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