

A photograph of Norman S. Paolini Jr. playing an acoustic guitar. He is wearing a grey suit jacket, a white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is looking upwards and to the right. The background is a church interior with a large stained glass window and a statue.

alumni profile

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and MERCY for all

Norman S. Paolini Jr. '69
answers a call from God
to help restore the
faith of Buffalo's
most deprived
and disadvantaged.

NORMAN S. PAOLINI JR. '69 understands the meaning of the term

'leap of faith.' Twelve years ago, this husband and

father of four left a secure job as a cancer research scientist at

Roswell Park to answer a *call from God.*



ST. LUKE'S PROVIDES TWO MEALS A DAY, MONDAY THROUGH SATURDAY AND ONE MEAL ON SUNDAY. IT IS NOT UNUSUAL TO FEED 200 PEOPLE AT THE BRUNCH MEAL AND 300 PEOPLE AT THE DINNER MEAL.

PICTURED AT LEFT IS NORMAN S. PAOLINI '69 (CENTER), SURROUNDED BY ST. LUKE'S FAITHFUL VOLUNTEERS.

"Throughout my life God has led me to minister to the poor and the needy in our society, to provide for them."

Paolini's calling came in 1991, during a pilgrimage to Fatima, Portugal, where the Blessed Virgin Mary is believed to have appeared in 1917. But his work for the Lord began nearly a quarter century earlier while he was an undergraduate student at Canisius.

"I was invited to play my guitar at Mass in Christ the King Chapel," recalls Paolini. At the time, the Roman Catholic Church was undergoing a transformation following the Second Vatican Council, which allowed for changed guidelines to the traditional church music. What resulted was a musical revolution, of sorts, and the birth of the folk Mass. "That experience at Canisius, and learning the folk Mass, served as my foundation for faith and became a roadway for everything else in my life."

Soon after, Paolini began playing the folk Mass at Buffalo's St. Ann's RC Church on Sundays and later at his home parish of St. Margaret's RC Church, also in Buffalo. He used his gift of music to minister to patients at Roswell Park, throughout his 22-year career there. He also became more involved with the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, a movement within the church that encouraged people to use the gifts of the Holy Spirit to undertake various tasks for the renewal of the church.

But it wasn't until Paolini traveled to Fatima, that his true purpose became clear. It was there that he met Buffalo restaurant owner Amy Betros.

"I saw her in the airport. She lost her luggage so I offered to help her find some clothing," recalls Paolini. "But Amy wasn't concerned. She said, 'Jesus and Mary are here. What else do I need?'"

Instantly, Paolini knew "God introduced (him)" to someone whose spiritual devotion was as deep as his own. Over the course of the eight-day pilgrimage, it became evident they both shared a similar conviction to help those who are unable to help themselves.

Prior to meeting Betros, Paolini and his wife, Linda, hosted prayer groups three nights a week, as a way to offer help or a chance to the neighborhood's most needy.

At the same time, Betros was doing her best to feed Buffalo's hungry out the back of her restaurant, Amy's Place on Main Street.

Both lived and worked in the city. So why did it take a trans-Atlantic trip for Paolini and Betros to meet?

"God had a plan," says Betros. "That plan was for us to meet at that time so, together, we could return to spiritually nurture those in need."

Once back in Buffalo, Paolini and Betros founded Madonna of the Streets Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to serving the city's less fortunate. It operated out of a back office at Amy's Place but Paolini's ministering brought them into Buffalo's most dire neighborhoods to deliver food, money and clothing to the distressed and displaced.

As word of Madonna of the Streets began to spread across the city, the number of people it served began to grow. Soon, it became clear to Paolini that in order to continue to do God's work, he must devote all his time to it.

He was faced with a difficult decision.

If Paolini resigned from Roswell, he and Linda would have to raise their family solely on her income as a school teacher at St. John the Baptist. But the words of the Gospel kept repeating in Paolini's mind. "It says, 'Go, sell what you have and give it to the poor ... then come follow me,'" he recounts. He and Linda prayed on these words for some time until "Linda said, 'We'll have to trust in God.'"

They did and on October 1, 1993, Paolini retired from Roswell and committed the rest of his life to carry out the seven corporal works of mercy: feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; clothe the naked; shelter the homeless; visit the imprisoned and the sick; and bury the dead. Betros soon followed and gave up her share of the restaurant.

"The Lord inspired me but Norm was the reason I gave everything up," says Betros. "I had a restaurant and flipped eggs. I didn't know the Scripture. I didn't know how to minister. I learned all that from Norm."

With full-time dedication to the organization, Paolini began to search for a permanent home for the mission. He soon learned that St. Luke's RC Church on the city's East Side was for sale. It was another blow to a neighborhood that already suffered from high crime, drug traffic, prostitution and poverty. But Paolini saw the vacant property as an ideal location for the growing mission. It consisted of a church, a rectory, a school and a convent, and occupied an entire city block between Sycamore Street and Walden Avenue.





For more information on Norman S. Paolini '69 or St. Luke's Mission of Mercy, visit www.stlukesmissionofmercy.org.

The Catholic Diocese required \$200,000 up front to purchase the property. Neither Paolini nor Betros had that kind of money. Still, they made an offer.

"We literally prayed after we made the offer to Bishop (Edward) Head," says Paolini. "God is sometimes very last minute when we ask Him for things but He does come through and He did then."

"God provided the money" one day before their bid expired by way of a friend Paolini knew from his prayer meetings. On August 1, 1994, he and Betros reopened St. Luke's Church as St. Luke's Mission of Mercy. They are co-directors of the mission but Paolini underscores that "St. Luke's is really run by God."

"As Mother Theresa once said, 'It's not me. It is God working through me. We are simply God's stewards, managing what is already His.'"

Those early years at St. Luke's were difficult ones. The mission took in all sorts of people from the streets. And with only Paolini, Betros and five other volunteers, the small group was doing the work of an army. Still, they welcomed each visitor to St. Luke's with open arms.

"At first, I thought they were so naïve to take me in when they didn't even know who I was," recalls Michelle, one of the first residents at St. Luke's. Then, a drug-addicted 20-year old living on the streets, Michelle turned to St. Luke's to prevent Child Protective Services from taking her crack-addicted newborn girl from her.

Paolini and Betros fixed up a room for Michelle, and she and her daughter began to thrive under the love and care of the mission.

"They made me feel welcomed and loved, and helped me realize that my daughter was something for which I could live," says Michelle, who has been clean and off the streets for nearly 12 years. She has also committed herself to full-time missionary work at St. Luke's. "God saved my life and my daughter's life, so now I give my life to Him in service."

Today, hundreds of people benefit from St. Luke's Mission of Mercy. It provides shelter for the homeless, a rehabilitation facility for recovering addicts, a residence for abandoned adolescent boys, housing for single parents and their children, and helps the poor gain access to social services.

Betros administers many of these services so that Paolini is free to minister. Oftentimes, he visits the sick at area hospitals and comforts their families. Other days he ministers at funerals or memorial services. His guitar is always with him. Paolini also performs in Voices of Mercy, St. Luke's musical group, which travels throughout the community to minister at parish healing Masses, retreats, missions and fund raisers.

It is all-encompassing work and Paolini is rarely home or able to visit his grandchildren out of town. "Not having them close by is a cross I pick up everyday," he says. Linda is at his side, however, "whenever she doesn't have school or papers to correct."

Ministering to the needs of so many can be overwhelming. But "as it were in the Scripture," adds Paolini, "God sends laborers to the vineyard."

Currently, there are 19 full-time missionaries and more than 100 missionary associates who work 12 hour days, every day. They feed upwards of 500 people daily and deliver food baskets to 2,000-plus families on holidays. They live with and care for the residents at St. Luke's or any of its 26 properties across the city. They assist with and attend St. Luke's daily Mass, including Sunday liturgy; its Eucharistic Adoration; and morning and evening

prayer services. Above all, they are committed to serving God's poor and talking about the mercy of God to anyone who invites them. They are all volunteers.

"His divine providence really sustained us in the beginning and every single month since," says Paolini. No truer words were spoken.

St. Luke's Mission of Mercy depends solely on donations from private individuals or corporations. It receives no funding from the dioceses or the government. "The government carries with it certain conditions, which are not compatible with our Catholic faith," notes Paolini.

With St. Luke's monthly operating expenses more than \$20,000, Paolini puts his faith in God to make ends meet. He always comes through.

Recently, St. Luke's nearly missed a \$7,000 gas payment, which put it in jeopardy of losing its heat. "All we could do was pray," recalls Paolini. The day the bill came due, St. Luke's received two donations in the mail, one for \$5,000, another for \$2,000. "There are hundreds more stories like this one," Paolini adds. "God supplies us in ways that could fill chapters."

Stories like this reaffirm Paolini's faith but his greatest affirmation comes during Mass, when he stands beside the altar and plays his guitar as former prostitutes, drug addicts, abused children and abandoned teens receive communion.

"When I see them I know I am seeing transformed people," says Paolini. "They are not just coming for a free meal, a place to stay or a hand-out. They are coming to Mass of their own free will. They are coming to God because they've seen his mercy and know that it's real."

Their faith has been restored and that is exactly what Paolini intended when he co-founded St. Luke's Mission of Mercy.

"The world may look at Norm and think he has his head in the sky," says Betros. "But that's what I love about him the most. He has his head where God wants it — with Him." ■