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Faith gave lawyer the calling to help low-income families find better lives

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Jun. 26, 2012 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Sr. Camille: Kevin Walsh, 38, came to my attention as someone with the passion and power to help make dreams come true -- specifically the dreams of individuals forced by poverty to raise their children in high-crime neighborhoods.

You do this as an associate director of Fair Share Housing Center, a position you've held for the past 12 years. Before we get into the ways in which you accomplish this, I'd like to ask where your personal dreams took root. Where and with whom did you begin your life?

Not too far down the road from where I live now, at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Camden, N.J. My parents, Margaret and Patrick Walsh, were Irish immigrants from Counties Mayo and Galway, respectively. I grew up with my older brother and three older sisters in Pennsauken, N.J., where my parents owned and operated a landscaping business.

Where did you go to school?

I attended St. Peter Elementary School in Merchantville, N.J.; Camden Catholic High School in Cherry Hill; Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.; and Rutgers School of Law in Camden, N.J.

Did you have a particular role model?

I have several. First and foremost, my father and mother, who worked hard running the family business. I gained my strong work ethic from them. Their example of treating their lower-income employees with dignity, respect and kindness was a powerful lesson that continues to influence the work that I do and who I strive to be today. My mother is also my role model when it comes to parenting. I once asked her what guided her and my father in their parenting, and she simply replied, "I don't know; we just loved you." And my inspiration in my work for social justice is the founder and executive director of Fair Share Housing Center, Peter O'Connor.

Peter's steadfastness and devotion to the cause of justice in housing is an important example of how to focus one's efforts. He calls to mind for me Archbishop Oscar Romero's observation: "We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well."

What is your image of God? Has it changed over time?

After my first year of law school, I took a year off to serve with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps in Richmond, Va., and developed an appreciation for the Jesuits' understanding of finding God in all things. While volunteering that year at a legal aid, I represented a man who had been homeless for decades. I would say he has been one of my more vivid images of God. I saw Jesus in this man in a way I have with few others because of his daily willingness to confront his particular struggles. And as a lawyer who must be comfortable with the conflict that is part of the work I do, I have to believe that God is also present in the midst of the adversarial process, knowing that my efforts are serving a greater purpose while, of course, always praying that my arguments win the day.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage? Why does this hold appeal?

My favorite is from Isaiah: "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." I have always appreciated the simplicity of this message and the challenge it evokes. In a world in which war and violence are pervasive, this passage reminds me that one of the most important callings of our faith is to be nonviolent. I believe that this aspect of our faith is too often swept under the rug and that working for peace should be a greater focus of today's church.

How did you meet your wife?

Rosemary and I met through her brother, who I met in college and is one of my best friends. She also did the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. We started dating in 2002, got married in 2006 and now have three boys who are 4, 2 and a half and 1. We are exhausted in a way we never imagined but are sustained by the sound of the boys' laughter, their love for dancing and roughhousing, their curiosity and imagination, and their silliness. We especially enjoy listening to the conversations they think up for almost any object -- from cars and trucks to blocks and grapes.

What or who inspired you to become a lawyer?

I'm not sure that I was ever inspired to be a lawyer but somehow found myself headed in that direction. As the end of college approached, I was somewhat aimless. My college roommate had an extra application to take the LSATs, so I took it and applied to a few law schools. I didn't develop a clear sense of purpose or an interest in becoming a public interest lawyer until I took a year off of school and volunteered. And then I realized that this was what I was meant to do. Also, going to law school in Camden, one of the nation's poorest cities, helped to keep me focused on my desire to work for social justice and in part led me to do the work I do of suing towns that use their zoning laws to exclude lower-income families and people with special needs.

Do you see a connection between the work you do and your Catholic faith?

I started law school with the goal of making a lot of money. That all changed during my year with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. During that year, I learned what it is to live your faith -- to work for the most vulnerable and oppressed and to attempt to live in solidarity with them. I am grateful to be a public interest lawyer because my job enables me to work in a way that is connected to my values. Advocating on behalf of the poor and needy in my community sustains my faith on a daily basis.

Please describe some of the accomplishments of the Fair Share Housing Center.

We have brought cases that have led New Jersey's wealthier communities to provide opportunities for thousands of homes for lower-income families, seniors and people with special needs. Altogether, the effort to promote racial and economic integration in New Jersey has led to the creation of 65,000 affordable homes, usually through clearing zoning hurdles that prevent the private sector, with no government funding, from developing communities that include affordable housing. The majority of New Jersey municipalities would exclude the poor if given the chance to do so, even though in my experience the average New Jerseyan recognizes the importance of providing housing for all income ranges in all communities.

65,000 affordable homes represents the fulfillment of many dreams. Would you please describe what families have experienced?

Families who move from communities with a lot of street crime have realized that they were desensitized to what was going on in their old community, but they don't realize it until they move to a place with little street crime. Parents enjoy being able to let their kids ride their bikes on the sidewalks without worrying. People often remain connected to the friends and institutions in their old neighborhoods. The transitions can be difficult, but the people I've spoken to about it are glad they moved to a new home with greater opportunities.

What more needs to be done?

If most people truly believe, as I think they do, that all people deserve to live in decent, safe and affordable housing, our elected officials need to do more to make that happen. And it's not just about a supply of housing that people can afford; it's also about its location. We celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. but forget his call for a society in which people from all races live together. Too many people are willing to accept racial and economic segregation in housing and schools because they forget that separate is not equal. Policies of the past have encouraged our separation as a society. Our church and society at large should work harder to bridge the racial and economic divides that separate us as people and unfairly segregate lower-income families from opportunities.

The city of Camden is often cited as having high crime and few opportunities for families trying to escape it. Any comment about this?

Camden is so troubled because it is detached from the region surrounding it and overwhelmingly home to lower-income families with few jobs to go around. There are tremendous and generous efforts in the city to lessen the negative effects of poverty, but those efforts generally fail to address the root causes of Camden's ailments. There needs to be a greater focus on providing families living in Camden with the opportunity to live closer to jobs and excellent schools. This will break generational cycles of poverty and dramatically increase the life chances of lower-income families who can access the job markets, schools and safe streets offered in communities in the region around Camden.

Do you think the work you are doing is having an impact?

Yes. A recent study of an affordable housing development in Mount Laurel, N.J., details the tremendous positive impact of providing opportunities for lower-income families to move out of poor, high-crime neighborhoods to more affluent, stable communities. The study describes how simply being exposed to less violence and living closer to jobs dramatically improves a family's well-being. This premise may seem fairly obvious, but the study is helpful to respond to people who oppose our work. Knowing of these positive results lends greater urgency to our work to see that affordable housing is created in communities throughout the state to serve the needs of lower-income families.

What do you wish for your children?

I want them to be happy and fulfilled. I want them to say they had a fun childhood and were encouraged to be who they are. I'd like them to understand my wife's and my passion for social justice. I'd like them to know the words to a few Irish ballads. Everything else will follow from those things.

What do you perceive as the strengths in Catholicism?

The church's social justice teachings and its commitment to speaking up for the poor and marginalized is a tremendous asset in the fight for social justice. Since becoming a lawyer, I've worked to end the death penalty in New Jersey and to enforce and expand New Jersey's affordable housing laws. The church has the ability to mobilize people around these and other important issues so that our laws reflect our values.

Is there anything you would change?

There are a few, but there is one relatively small change that I think is doable right now. Something that has always bothered me is the church's failure to acknowledge during the liturgy the commandment to love our enemies. Every Mass includes a prayer for American service members and our leaders, but I believe our faith also calls us to pray for the civilians and soldiers whom our country has declared to be our enemies. I don't believe nationalism should trump the call to love one another.

How do you relax?

I don't! I have three boys who are 4 and younger. The last time I really relaxed was in 2008 or so. I look forward to relaxing again sometime in the next decade.

What gives you happiness?

Being a husband and father and succeeding in these roles makes me happy. Getting a good belly-laugh out of the boys. Doing good work and winning an important case in court. Drinking coffee, listening to good music and reading the newspaper. Going to Ireland and Hawaii, neither of which I've been to in a while. And working in the yard and attempting to have a garden that lives up to the old Walsh Landscaping standards.

What saddens you?

I'm not often sad, and if I am it usually turns into anger, which motivates me to take action. False convictions of people on death row, towns that attempt to shut out the poor, the indifference of powerful people to suffering -- these are the things that propel me into trying to do something to make a difference.

Where do you go for support in your efforts to bring justice to those deprived of it?

We work closely with clergy from different faiths, civil rights groups and other housing advocates. Alliances of people from different places, ideologies, faiths and political backgrounds are the most powerful ways to effect change.

At 38, you must have unfulfilled dreams of your own. What comes first to mind?

I'd love to drive across the country or go by train, and to see the pyramids (something my dad always wanted to do). And I look forward to sharing a pint with my three boys in a pub in Ireland someday.

Kevin, I hope you don't mind my alerting you that you'll have to travel farther than cross country to see the pyramids!

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, has written a soon-to-be-published book titled *Stories of Forgiveness*

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