

A Father to the Fatherless

It breaks Joe Loyal's heart that so many kids today don't have two parents. That's why the Georgia retiree now spends all of his time reaching kids in lower-class neighborhoods.

Joe Loyal knows what it means to suffer loss. But it's the hardships in life, he says, that have made him strong.

"I lost my mom, dad and son in two and a half years," he says.

A year and a half after his grown son died from a rare strain of pneumonia, Loyal decided to go for his dream of beginning a children's ministry.

"It made me more determined to reach more people because it made me more dedicated to the Lord," he says of losing his son. "Since I was able to go through that and not fall apart, it gave me strength to believe I could do some other things that the Lord would be pleased with."

When the 59-year-old Loyal retired from his job as a food salesman for Kraft, he knew he wanted to begin a ministry for kids, but he didn't have the \$9,000 it would take to buy a van and other equipment. Even though he made no appeals for funds, little by little the money and services came in, until he had the van and everything he needed to begin ministry.

"All of this just fell in place, and I just knew it was the Lord," he says.

For almost four years, Loyal has been "retired and refired," he says, thrusting himself headlong into an inner-city

children's ministry that is thriving today. Hundreds of street kids come to play games, get treats, have fun and—most importantly—experience a move of God in their lives. Loyal ministers in 18 to 20 Atlanta suburbs, including his hometown of Athens, Georgia.

Through his Faith Today Ministries, Loyal adds hands and feet to the gospel message, making regular visits to build relationships with kids and their parents.

“We want to establish that we are not a one-night stand,” he says. “We are going to be a force.”

Loyal says it takes six to eight people to promote, set up and conduct the two-hour ministry sessions that often have parents and kids alike giving a standing ovation. Loyal targets lower-class neighborhoods where children either don't attend church or attend only services geared for adults. His aim is to speak to kids on their own level.

“We present the gospel in a high-energy, high-activity manner,” he says, adding that the kids' ages range from about 3 to 16.

Loyal and his ministry team are in a needy neighborhood just about every weekend of the year. Typically, they post fliers and give away hot dogs and candy to attract a crowd. Then they amuse the kids with various high-energy activities that include playing games of Bible Trivia, interacting with a Sponge Bob character who tells them how their minds soak things up like a sponge, listening to popular secular songs with Christian lyrics, and other activities that instruct children in the ways of God.

Loyal believes if his team can build a basic moral foundation in children, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit can do the rest. "We're trying to get kids to understand that there is a God and there is a right and there is a wrong," he says.

The fact that most of the neighborhoods Loyal visits are in economically depressed areas does not deter him. "I've been in projects passing out fliers, and there'll be a guy in the breezeway selling drugs," he says.

Some of the kids he's worked with have actually joined his ministry team. One teenage boy, Shamar, was running with the wrong crowd when God touched him at one of Loyal's ministry events. God moved, and soon after that Shamar was running the sound equipment for Loyal. Now he's a regular team member.

"If I tell him I'll pick him up at 7:30 in the morning, he's ready, and that's saying a lot for a 14-year-old," Loyal says. "Wherever I go, he goes. He's there to help me."

Mentoring boys and young men who have no father figures is a key part of Loyal's ministry. "I firmly believe it takes men to raise boys," he says. "They need inspiration from the men."

Loyal says that out of 15 kids in a group it is likely that only two or three of them have both parents. "Some of them say, 'I don't even know my dad,'" he explains. "I can relate to these kids. I didn't have very much growing up, so I understand what it's like."

Loyal's parents separated when he was 13. His father didn't return home until four years later—crucial years when a teen needs a dad, Loyal says.

But his father embraced Jesus at the age of 79. "He was 80 years old before I ever heard him say, 'Son, I love you,'" Loyal remembers. "It touched me, and it touched him, too."

Loyal is always looking for dedicated volunteers, people who will get involved for more than just one or two trips. But Loyal believes many U.S. Christians simply are complacent.

"It's hard to get people out of the four walls. God wants us to go out there and be the church, not just be a spectator on Sunday morning," he says.

Community leaders have seen the impact of Loyal's work. Local businessman Dwain Chambers, a former mayor of Athens, has known Loyal for 20 years. "Joe is genuine," Chambers told Charisma. "He loves the Lord with all of his heart, and he is committed to doing the Lord's work."

Chambers saw Loyal's inner character come to the surface during the time he lost his son. "He never questioned God," recalls Chambers, who also says he's impressed by Loyal's low profile. "He does not seek recognition. He does his work quietly, and he wants all the glory to go to God."

In addition to his children's ministry, Loyal hosts five radio broadcasts a week and visits four or five prisons a month. He also makes regular visits to day-care centers. His ministry addresses issues faced by the poor and transcends ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Loyal says when he was beginning the ministry, his wife, Shirley, wasn't sure he could raise the money and develop the

organization needed for a successful program. Now, she's an integral part of the team with him every weekend.

Loyal operates his ministry on a tight budget, but he continues to not solicit funds, receiving only what others give after God moves on their hearts.

Though Loyal is happy with the size of his ministry, he knows he could have a bigger impact with more volunteers. "I'd like to be able to duplicate myself," he says. "I'd like to find people that will take a step of faith and move into the area of street ministry."

Richard Daigle manages public relations for a private company in Atlanta. He and his wife, Jan, have three children.

For more information on Faith Today Ministries, call 706-353-7519. Send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Unsung Heroes, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.