

She Just Won't Quit Giving

People have thrown bricks at Mina Paille to stop her from preaching. But this 80-year-old St. Louis woman can't be stopped.

Wake up! Don't sleep! You're dying and sleeping. I don't know how to say it another way. I want you to grow up in the Lord," says Mina Paille, chastising a napping 41-year-old man in her church.

He is one of about 20 gathered this day to receive a bag of food and household goods that are promised to all who sit for the session that begins with preaching. But what he and many of the sad-eyed, dispirited people filling the pews with him don't realize is that they will also receive a few bits of manna from heaven—doled out by the 80-year-old founder of the Love & Care Youth Center and Church.

With the help of a dozen volunteers, Paille runs the two-level brick building in St. Louis, Missouri, which has become a safe haven for many whom society would rather not see. It is those whom she beckons to come to the center for weekly Bible studies, chat sessions, prayer, church services and groceries.

Every Sunday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and third Saturday of the month, this feisty, white-haired woman ministers the Word of God, oftentimes filling the modest sanctuary with the homeless and others with no place to go.

Food is their incentive, but they often find themselves engrossed by what this firebrand has to say.

When she is merely speaking, it can be difficult to understand Paille's heavy French accent acquired from her native Marseilles, France. But when she's preaching, her voice is clear, articulate and altogether powerful.

Standing only five-foot-four, she grabs people by their hands and arms, offering a gentle hug or caress while she prays with them during the altar call. And each prayer is prayed as if it may be their last.

She makes no excuses for her ministry. "I want to give you Jesus," says Paille, folding her hands in front of her chest.

"Don't say 'nobody loves me,'" she continues. "That's a lie of the devil." Before long, the crowd multiplies as others stream in. Each person stops at a desk to sign in and claim a meal ticket before sitting down.

By most accounts, Paille got a late start in ministry. Having grown up in France with a Catholic mother and Muslim father, she said she knew little about the power of Jesus Christ. Even when she and her late husband, Ray, migrated to the states in 1964, she knew very little about His power.

But she soon found out. A woman from Paille's homeland, looking for a job and toting a Bible written in French, just happened to inquire at Paille's family pizza parlor.

Paille was inspired by the new employee's love for the Word. After reading it for herself, Paille was convinced that the God of the Bible wasn't exactly the one that she was learning about at a nearby community church. At age 52, she gave her life to the Lord and was baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Soon after, she began holding mini-services at the pizza parlor, packing the place out on Tuesday nights when she offered free pizza for those who stayed around to listen. In 1981 she established the Love & Care Youth Center.

"We were in a storefront back then," daughter Martina Gray recalls of one of the centers that was next to a raucous bar. "[Mom] would come home bloody, having been hit with bricks. Someone had even pulled a gun on her once."

Yet none of it hindered Paille. "I have to give Him to everybody," she says, shaking her head resolutely.

Eventually, Paille prayed the bar out of the neighborhood; she later occupied that space, too.

But after becoming cramped in the smaller spaces, she stumbled across the current building. It had an office, two kitchen areas, room for Bible studies, space to set up tables for food handouts, and an adjacent building that was perfect for a pulpit and pews.

Today, Paille feeds more than 200 people a month. And she rarely misses a beat. Although she is a little hard of hearing and has had cataract surgery on her eyes, she opens and closes the center regularly by herself.

Paille says she feels out of sorts only when she is not at the center. "God's peace is in my heart. The joy of my Lord is my strength," she says, singing words that are obviously intimate to her.

The ministry has always been supported by private donations alone, and Paille recalls story after story of God's just-in-time intervention. For the last 20 years, she says, Bible teacher Joyce Meyer has supported her work.

"She stops by the church every now and then," Paille says. "She knows what I'm doing here."

Indeed, Meyer sees the work of God in action at Paille's humble facility. "The Bible tells us that when we do good to a child it is the same as doing good for God," the worldwide evangelist has said. "This has been Mina's life."

When she first eyed her current building, she said an official at one bank told her he couldn't finance it. After Paille prayed, the man told her he could and would give her 14 years to pay off the loan. Thankful, Paille kept on praying. Within

two years, the 14-year loan had been paid in full.

Paille enjoys sharing her own testimonies in hopes of liberating others. "I didn't know love until I met God," she often relates to the congregation. "My God healed me of scoliosis, migraines, gall bladder problems and fear. There is nothing impossible with God."

People typically hear about her center by word of mouth.

That's how Kenny Bernard, 41, of St. Louis had heard of it. A few months ago, he made his home wherever he could, including bus stops, abandoned cars and park benches. His brother had stopped by the center to pick up some food and told him about the center in the process.

"She's really helping me to clean myself up," says Bernard, smiling though somewhat embarrassed. "I'm finally getting myself together. They helped me to get a new apartment, everything."

Bernard now serves as one of the center's volunteers. In fact, many of the volunteers are those who have been helped by its program. Others belong to churches throughout the community.

Among the dutiful team are Paille's three adult children, Martina Gray and twins Yves and Michel Paille. They help out with everything from service details to transportation. Paille's husband died of cancer in 1979, two years before she opened her first center.

The people who frequent the center have a keen fondness for Paille, and it shows. Adults call her up once they have landed a job. Little kids tell her when they've lost a tooth. Helpers greet her with hugs and kisses, which is enough to add a twinkle to her eyes.

One parishioner, after receiving his weekly bag of food, returned to the center with a loaf of bread under his arm. "I

have too much," he told Paille.

On Thursdays, Paille meets with local youths who are picked up at their homes and on nearby streets by center volunteers. Once back at the office, they eat a cooked snack and have a Bible study.

Paille is keenly aware that many of them grapple with grown-up issues ranging from fornication and homosexuality to abandonment, drug abuse and incest. That is why it is so important to her to reach them. Sometimes, the grandmother of six does this with goodie bags she hands out before they return home.

Nevertheless, she doesn't consider herself a hero. "I'm a Christian working for the Lord," she insists.

It's a big ministry, one that Paille feels she was meant to work for a time. And even though she knows that she has more days behind her than in front, she is not concerned about the direction of the center. She believes many of the volunteers that work with her have caught the vision and will keep it alive long after she is gone.

Always dreaming and thinking how to better serve, Paille says the only component missing right now is music. "The kids want to know how to sing," she says. "We have a piano but no one to play it."

Yet, anyone who knows her knows she is not sitting around waiting. With her undying faith, Paille has probably already prayed and rattled a few trees to make it happen.

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