



INSTITUTE OF SCHOOL & PARISH DEVELOPMENT

Bringing People, Process, and Ministry Together to Build the

Kingdom of God.

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Development Directions

MY SON DUSTIN: A JOURNEY INTO CATHOLIC SCHOOL AND PARISH DEVELOPMENT

by
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I believe that in order to be successful in anything we do, we have to have passion and a desire to be the very best that we can be. I often refer to that as “fire in the belly.” By that, I do not mean being “top dog” or the “star” or the “hot shot.” I simply mean, taking the gifts that God has given us, developing those gifts, continuously working to improve them, and then making them work for the good of our cause(s). In our work across the country at ISPD, we see many people who possess that “fire in the belly,” and we see some who do not.

As pastors, superintendents, principals, presidents, development directors, board members, faculty and staff members, parent leaders, alumni leaders, Catholic consultants, and believers in Catholic schools and parish life, we all have similar missions: to develop and advance our Catholic institutions by engaging people to help us build the Kingdom of God. This is an awesome task and responsibility. As many of us know, this work is not for the weak of heart; it is not for those who quit early; and, it is not for those who want to make a “quick buck” or “hit somebody up for money.” Being part of a vibrant Catholic Development/Advancement effort is rewarding, enriching, and fulfilling. Done properly, for the right reasons, this ministry helps us to develop and grow as stewards; it puts order into our lives, as we realize that our lives are not just about us; they are about doing God’s work and what He wants to develop and advance. Properly understood, our ministry calls us to reach out as Jesus did and, despite the naysayers and those who only want to guard their Kingdom,

bring people closer to Him. Over time, we develop a burning desire to draw people into our Faith Community and invite them to stand with us and walk along side of us – for a lifetime. In our Catholic schools and parishes, we can impact so many lives -- from that smiling face that gets out of the car in the carpool line in the morning to the person we see only at Easter to the student or athlete who does not believe in himself/herself. Directly or indirectly, we all can make a huge difference.

But, where do we develop this passion? How do we come to realize that this work of Catholic Development is so much more than running a fund-raiser or “tapping” someone for money? How do we get away from ALWAYS measuring what we do by the question, “How much money did you raise?” True Catholic Development is much deeper, and so we invite you to explore the ways that can connect you to its true meaning and to find and/or re-discover that “fire in the belly.” What are the vehicles that led you to your ministry? And so, for a very special reason, I would like to share my journey.

Twenty-six years ago today, I lost my five year old son Dustin. He died of an illness (rhabdomyolysis) that impacts few children. One day he was here, and then four days later he was not. What adds deeper meaning to his passing is that he started complaining about his legs cramping on Good Friday and then he passed away on Easter Monday afternoon. In this Lenten season, our family’s faith becomes magnified through the remembrance of his death.

Dustin was a very likeable child – always smiling, always laughing, always a cheery twinkle in his eye. He attended St. Rosalie Catholic School in Harvey, Louisiana and was a favorite of many of his teachers and the principal – Sister Jeanne. He was elected king of the Mardi Gras at the school and loved every minute of the attention. He was hardly ever down or sad, and even when he was punished for doing something crazy, it was only a matter of minutes before he would bounce back. One day he came home from school and announced that he was going to be a priest! Five years old and a priest?

Although Dustin always had a smile and a kind word, he frequently battled with illnesses, and so that week of Easter it really wasn’t a huge surprise when he complained about cramping in his legs. On Friday, his mother took him to the doctor and then on Saturday he was in the hospital – supposedly just for precaution. By Monday morning, things turned for the worst as he was rushed to the operation room with a heart attack, and it was then that we realized he might be in his last hours.

I will never forget the doctor at Ochsner coming to us and, in tears, saying, "We have done all that we can do. He will not last much longer, so please, go now and say your good-byes."

It's funny how moments like that are branded in your mind. I remember walking into the OR and looking at my son as he lay on an operation table. He was in pain, but he still had that smile. As I tried to maintain my composure, he looked up and the last words he said to me were, "Daddy, I'm going to be with Jesus."

Dustin passed away Easter Monday afternoon at 3:42.

The next year was a blur. I was offered a job teaching English at Mercy Academy in New Orleans during that 1986 – 1987 school year. Sister Mary Ann Hardcastle, RSM, hired me. I really don't know how I made it through that year; the pain was great and getting up every morning was a chore. All of us who have lost loved ones know the feelings and the struggles, and yet there is a faint desire to overcome and build something that will take us to the next day. Two thoughts kept running through my mind that year. I once had a sociology teacher in college – Dr. Ben Kaplan – who once told us how much better it is "to light a candle rather than curse the darkness." I remembered that, and I also remembered my son's last words. Those were the two threads that I hung on – one of hope and one of faith.

Time moved on and the healing began. Life may shut a lot of doors but God always gives us a window somewhere; we just need to find it. Gradually the pain moved into energy and I developed a strong desire to do something meaningful – something that would make a difference. I moved into administration then into development, and then in 1991 there was a voice inside of me calling out to begin a new ministry. And so, with a leap of real faith, I left the security of a regular Catholic school paycheck and started the Institute of School and Parish Development (ISPD). I have never looked back.

The fire that burned so strongly back years ago is still alive and still as powerful as ever. So many times as I leave home and head out on the road for another week in another city, I ask myself, "Why am I doing this?" And the answer comes back immediately: "You do it because of Dustin and because you have gifts to share." There was a reason my son was able to say what he said, and I owe it to the Faith Community of St. Rosalie Parish and School. They were

very instrumental in developing Dustin's faith – so much so that he even considered being a religious, and so much so that his final words echoed his belief in his Maker. He did not get to that point alone; a pastor, a principal and his teachers were greatly responsible for bringing him to that point in his life. And I cannot help but believe that Christ was there to hold his hand as he crossed to the other side.

The death of my son was the birth of this ministry. In my anguish, God gave me a lifeline and hope for the future. I have been blessed countless time since 1986 – with my wife Suzy and my daughter Megan, and my older daughters – Lisa, Shannon and Cheri – and the nine grandchildren. In fact, my oldest grandson Jordan was born the day after Dustin's birthday – September 26th. God works in wonderful ways.

Twelve years ago we started the Dustin Ewing Memorial Scholarship at St. Rosalie where at 8th grade graduation a member of our family has the opportunity to award an outstanding 8th grade student who is going to continue his/her education in a Catholic high school with a scholarship for their first year. The faculty and staff vote for the recipient based upon the traits we always attributed to Dustin:

- Courage
- Pleasing, smiling personality
- Always reaching out to help others
- Unconditional love
- Belief in the love of Jesus Christ
- Polite and well-mannered

A plaque with Dustin's picture and the names of the recipients for each year hangs in the lobby of St. Rosalie Catholic School in Harvey, Louisiana.

"Fire in the belly." It pushes us onward and brings about introspection, motivation and purpose. My journey is not unique, for there are hundreds just like it. However, my quest has always been the same – to work with a diocese or a Catholic school or a parish and through the gifts God has given to really make a difference in helping build a stronger Faith Community. And possibly, even in the smallest degree – through this ministry -- help bring others, and myself, closer to Christ, so that we all, in our final hour might be able to say, "Daddy, I'm going to be with Jesus."