

Ray Cannata ('90)

## Toward the pain

*A minister forsakes America's wealthiest county and finds riches beyond his wildest expectations amid devastation.*



*The Shell Shockers soccer team hold up a section of dry wall before screwing it into the ceiling as they volunteer to rebuild the home of Lester Evans in St. Bernard as part of the St. Bernard Project.*

**ODDS ARE** that Ray Cannata ('90) wakes up talking. If his mouth were a rifle, it would have been on full automatic mode the March morning he entertained two visitors from Wake Forest. One of them was a seasoned scribe, and even he had to ask Ray to ease off the trigger a bit so he could catch his entire salvo.

Behind Ray's bursts are the boundless faith, hope, and charity he is bringing to the task of rebuilding New Orleans. Once uncomfortably ensconced in one of the nation's richest areas, the Presbyterian pastor is marshalling a ministry of mission work that to date has renovated some 300 flood-decimated houses in the Crescent City.

Raised in the outer boroughs of New York City, Ray followed the path of his father and enrolled in law school after graduating from Wake Forest. "It took me about five weeks to know it wasn't for me," he says while sitting with his wife, Kathy Fortier Cannata ('89), on the porch of their double shotgun house at the corner of Henry

Clay and Magazine in the underbelly of Uptown.

What was for him, he knew, was God's work. After completing his studies at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1991, he entered the Presbyterian ministry and joined a parish in the richest county per capita in the country—Somerset County, New Jersey. "For fourteen years I was bored out of my head," he says. "The church I was at was program-driven, with not much diversity. I wanted to move away from the suburbs and into an urban core."

Ray learned of a pastorate opening at a small church in New Orleans called Redeemer. The church, which was affiliated with the Presbyterian Church of America, the more liberal, socially active, and evangelical of the two branches of the denomination in America, was quartered in an unpretentious shotgun on Magazine Street and had already failed twice under previous pastors. New Orleans has the smallest concentration of evangelical Protestant churches in the nation, with

one-quarter of 1 percent of its houses of worship falling into that category, stacking the odds against the tiny parish.

"I was invited to come down a week before Katrina," he says. "I was working on my doctoral dissertation then, and I literally dropped my books to pick up the phone. I never picked them up again. I went down, became excited about its relational focus, fell in love with the city, and made an appointment to go down for a second interview.

"My appointment was for Monday, August 29—the day Katrina hit," he goes on. "I remember thinking as I watched the news reports of its approach that I hope they don't cancel my flight. Instead, they canceled the whole city."

Overnight, Ray was looking at an entirely different church—if it could even be called a church. "Two-thirds of the congregation left the city for good after the storm," he notes. "There were seventeen members left." But if anything, the disaster had only intensified his attraction to the post. "I turned down an offer from the most affluent church in San Diego before I knew for sure that I would be coming [to New Orleans]," he says. His appointment was approved in December, and on January 2, 2006, he, Kathy, and their two young children piled into their vehicle, put New Jersey in their rear-view mirror, and drove downhill to a place at the very bottom.

Redeemer's modest congregation was a mixed bag, populated by an eclectic panoply of starving-artist types, mostly musicians. There were eccentrics like the "Cat Lady," who cared for close to fifty felines, and young entrepreneurs perpetually

# AGAINST the WIND

buffeted and rendered itinerant by the incessant boom-and-bust vagaries of their aspirations. Membership turnover was high as a result. “As an example,” Ray says, “last year, we saw 120 members join and sixty leave.”

On the first Sunday that Ray preached, there were thirty-five people inside the mainstream church on St. Charles Avenue that Redeemer rents for its weekly services. “Everybody thought we needed an Oprah moment—a big hug, with everybody feeling everybody’s pain,” he says. “I said no; what we need is to serve our community. What I saw in this church was a deficit of purpose. We didn’t need coddling; we needed a mission.”

And a mission it got. Ray took a thousand bucks from the church’s coffers to buy tools and then launched an external fundraising effort that enabled it to buy and renovate a flood-damaged, 3,900-square-foot house in Broadmoor to house the missionaries he envisioned coming to volunteer. He got the word out and soon they started arriving—in groups small and large; from churches all over America; some 3,000 of them

over the past two years to help rebuild a broken community.

Ray says Redeemer—which today averages about 175 members, with between 110 and 115 attending services on any given Sunday—spends two-thirds of its budget on the project. “The homeowners supply the materials and we supply the labor,” he explains. “[Missionaries] stay anywhere from a weekend to four months, but probably 95 percent of them are here for a week. They put in fifty hours [of labor] and have time on their own to enjoy the city.” Fifteen former missionaries, mostly recent college graduates in their twenties, have returned to New Orleans to live and work. Among them is Mary Giardina (’06), who is serving as a sort of resident advisor at the Broadmoor house.

Ray estimates that churches are doing 80 percent of the grass-roots recovery work in the city. “People here have lost faith in political institutions,” he says. “They feel that the federal, state, and local governments have let them down, and they are very grateful for the churches.” He expects Redeemer to be active in the rebuilding effort for twenty years or more.

Ray has an aphorism for his mission: “moving toward the pain.” “When a plague struck Rome in the second century, the Romans moved out and the Christians moved in to care for the sick and dying,” he notes. “In the Middle Ages it was the Christians who responded to the suffering of the Black Death. New Orleans is the first real opportunity that we [as Christians] have had in this country in 200 years to move toward the pain.”

Although Ray acknowledges the dangers of living in perhaps America’s

most crime-infested city (recently someone was shot across the street from his son’s school in full view of the boy), and is dismayed by its entrenched poverty, the rate of which approximates 35 percent, he has come to love New Orleans, and he and Kathy plan to stay for the rest of their lives. (Although she grew up in Florida, Kathy has roots that run deep in New Orleans. Fortier is a venerable Louisiana name, and by moving to New Orleans she constitutes the eleventh consecutive generation of her family to have lived in the city.)

“I must know every shop member on Magazine Street for a mile each way,” Ray grins. “There’s so much here. The charter schools offer real promise for turning around the tragic cycle that has persisted here for so long. Uniforms are worn and discipline is stressed. There are schools devoted to architecture, music, and other subjects. Our four-year-old daughter goes to a charter school at which only French is spoken.”

He pauses to reflect. “Some missionaries think they’re coming here to save Sin City,” he says. “But to have an authentic Christian experience, you need two things: you need a clear picture of the Fall, the brokenness of the world, and you need a vivid picture of the Kingdom of Heaven. Yes, this is a city of bloodshed and pain. But it is also a city that knows how to celebrate and how to party, as Jesus Himself did.

“This place has as much to teach us [Christians] as we have to teach it—about celebration, diversity, forgiveness, and grace,” he concludes. “It shows a perfect picture of both the Fall and the Kingdom. That’s what I want for my kids.”



KEN BENNETT

*Ray and Kathy Cannata: ‘This place has as much to teach us as we have to teach it—about celebration, diversity, forgiveness, and grace.’*