

Hope captures the heart of the Bronx

Missionaries from around the world bring good news to New York's toughest neighborhood

BY PETER FEUERHERD

The four foreign missionaries make their way through the city, fingering their beads while reciting the Rosary in the languages of the local ethnic communities. The sound of salsa music pulsates from the buildings located on streets with unlikely names such as Featherbed Lane. Everywhere they go, the local people offer greetings or strange looks or apathetic going-about-their-business non-looks.

The missionaries, all young people in their 20s, are a French Catholic witness to America. Their specific mission territory is the Bronx, New York, in a section above the Cross Bronx Expressway churning through the city's poor-

est borough. Headquartered in an old rectory at St. Francis of Assisi Church on Shakespeare Avenue, they are part of a community called Heart's Home USA or *Points Coeur* in French.

The Bronx community, active about a year, is Heart's Home's first inroad in the United States. Heart's Home has existed since 1990, largely in Latin America, with communities in 20 countries, including in Asia, Africa, and Europe. They number about 150 young people in 30 communities worldwide.

What are they doing here, in the middle of the largest city of the world's only superpower? Cyril Rabeisen, who has taken a year off from his job at a French



CYRIL RABEISEN

Volunteers Alexandre and Seveine with neighborhood children in the Bronx.

energy firm, admits that the group has no program. After all, programs have come and gone in the Bronx, the place where politicians are always pledging improvements and where the native hip-hop style has been copied around the world by rebellious youth. They are here,

simply, to be with the poor.

It is the New York borough with a reputation for gritty urban violence and poverty. Still, much of the Bronx has gone about a rebirth. But people of Heart's Home are convinced that the

Bronx could use more than just another program.

"Our mission is not a program in the American way," says Rabeisen, a recent college graduate who acknowledges the puzzlement that greets his community. Members of Heart's Home USA have no grand schemes to remake the Bronx. They do not proselytize (most of the neighborhood consists of Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and other Hispanics who have their own Catholic culture).

Instead, they are here in the Bronx to make friends and to pray.

The mission is perhaps best defined by the daily routine of the community's eight members. It begins with morning prayer, an English lesson, daily Mass, an hour of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and household chores. There is a daily Rosary procession through the streets, and visits to the old and the lonely, as well as basketball with the neighborhood young people. The day ends with dinner and night prayer. It

is a structure built around finding spiritual uplift via prayer and through an appreciation of the lives of the poor, with a focus on helping children.



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It is an austere and quiet witness in the heart of Donald Trump's city, a place that pays more attention to glitz and power. The Heart's Home people describe it as a ministry of presence to the poor and lonely. "Our mission is not to convert," Rabeisen insists. "Our mission is to bring friendship and consolation to people who suffer. We visit them and try to be their friend."

Prayer is an intense focus of community life. And it is directly connected to the neighborhood. Their daily Rosary procession takes them through busy commercial strips and past the small grocery stores, fast-food joints, and apartment buildings that dominate the neighborhood.

The community's Blessed

Sacrament chapel is in a small front room of their modest home, a spot for daily reflection. As members pray in the late morning hours, they begin with a simple hymn sung in Spanish, French, or English. The sounds of silence are disturbed regularly by the muffled roar from the nearby expressway, mothers shouting at their children in Spanish, and the incessant staccato of car alarms.

The community includes Rabeisen; Sister Blandine, a member of the Servants of Jesus and Mary Congregation, the order central to the founding of Heart's Home in 1990; Lucie Almeras, a college philosophy student in the Bronx for a spell; and Thibaud de Portzamparc, a 20-year-old with Internet skills being put to use for the community. Heart's Home volunteers take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Sister Blandine's vows are for a lifetime; the others are for as long as they serve the community, usually for a year or two. They pay their

own way with the help of friends and neighbors in France and in the New York area.

The group notes that in France relatively few young people go to church regularly. But, they counter, they are among a small group of young people inspired by the vision of Pope John Paul II's witness to youth. The Bronx home is officially called Heart's Home John Paul II.

At lunch, they discuss their day and the people they have met in the neighborhood over the past year. There are the old people who rarely venture outside because of infirmity and fear of crime. Some in the neighborhood live in fear that they will be sent back home to the Dominican Republic or Honduras; the community assists them with resolving immigration problems. There's a young mother nearby with four children who is depressed because her hus-



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History and beauty easy to find in the Bronx

In recent decades, the Bronx has been associated in much of the public mind with poverty and urban decay. But the Bronx has an impressive and varied social history dating back to Colonial times. Its historic attractions include:

Lourdes of America at 833 Mace Ave. (phone: 718-882-0710). This replica of France's famous shrine is a dazzling sight, with hundreds of votive candles lit by devout pilgrims. The adjacent *Scala Santa* (Holy Stair) depicts different stages in the life of Jesus Christ and has a life-size sculpture of the Crucifixion. There's also a bookshop with Christian titles and gifts.

Edgar Allan Poe Cottage at Grand Concourse and East Kingsbridge Road (phone: 718-881-8900). America's great literary master lived in this farmhouse at the end of his life, and today the modest home looks very much as it did when Poe lived here from 1846 to 1849.

Fordham University between Webster Ave. and Kazimiroff Boulevard (phone: 718-817-3009). Four landmark structures grace the lush campus of one of the country's top Catholic universities: the Administration Building, a superb example of Greek Revival style; University Church, a Gothic Revival church; Alumni House, a small fieldstone house bearing the date 1840; and St. John's Residence Hall, an early example of American Collegiate Gothic. ■ WWW.ILOVETHEBRONX.COM

band has left her. That afternoon they plan to take her children, who are cramped in a small, hot apartment in the middle of a New York summer, to a nearby park for some recreation.

That focus on the needs of such children around the world inspired the founding of Heart's Home in 1990 by Thierry de Roucy, a French priest and member of the Servant of Jesus and Mary community. He was moved by the plight of distressed children he met during his visits to impoverished parts of the world. Heart's Home's mission, says de Roucy, "is to love so much as to be present wherever the Cross stands and wherever all the crucified of the

world stand today."

This is a noble sentiment for sure, but such a mission is not as easy as it might have been, particularly in the United States, where the Church is reeling from the massive sex abuse scandal. Upon advice from the archdiocese, the community does not allow children into its home, and works with young people only out in the open and in the presence of their parents. Still there are plenty of opportunities for outreach, says Sister Blandine.

Sister Blandine has been in the Bronx the longest, a little more than a year. She began with so little English that when she went shopping she could only guess at what meat she was buying. Now she moves easily around the neighborhood, her brown habit a familiar sight, as she greets people in Spanish and English.

Father Michael Sepp, pastor of St. Francis and the nearby Sacred Heart, says the community

has been a godsend for his ministry. The archdiocese does not have enough priests to have one live full time at St. Francis; the presence

of the community, says Sepp, provides a reassuring sign to parishioners that their church is alive and well.

"They are able to do things I can't do," he says, noting that Heart's Home members visit the sick and have an ear attuned to personal needs around the neighborhood. On the weekends, they visit patients at a nearby AIDS hospice.

These types of activities do not fit easily on organizational charts, Sepp notes. And the influence of their quiet prayer presence may be impossible to measure. But, says Sepp, "it has a much greater effect than we realize." CD

For more information, write to Heart's Home USA, 1544 Shakespeare Ave., Bronx, NY 10452 or call 718-901-1276. Web sites www.heartshomeusa.org or www.pointscœur.org.

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