

Coffee & Doughnuts with Erich March

The Catholic Review sits down with Erich March, president of King Memorial Park cemetery, vice president and COO of March Funeral Homes, and parishioner of St. Ann in Baltimore.

CR: What, and where, are your Catholic roots?

MARCH: My mother, Julia Roberta March, was a parishioner of St. Francis Xavier, the first African-American Catholic church in the U.S. My father, William C. March, was the son of a Lutheran minister who shunned him for marrying a Catholic.

In 1955, my father moved our family to East North Avenue, with the intention of opening a funeral home. Because my mother did not drive, she took her children to the nearest Catholic church within walking distance, St. Ann's. I was three years old, too young to know what segregation meant, but I remember, we always sat in the back of church. I attended grades one through eight at St. Ann School, under the guidance of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. I'm still a parishioner of St. Ann, now predominantly African-American.

CR: What led your parents to start offering free and reduced-cost bereavement services in 1982?

MARCH: "A Time of Sharing" was our recognition that there were unresolved issues or lack of support for families experiencing an especially painful death. Grief education and support was non-existent in African-American communities. My parents taught us that funeral service was not only a business, but a ministry. The same spirit that moved them to offer reduced-cost funerals moved us, as a family, to continue needed counseling and support beyond the day of the burial.

CR: Your family's efforts include Roberta's House. Explain, unfortunately, how its mission has expanded since its 2007 founding.

MARCH: Named for my mother, the nation's only minority-operated grief center helps children and families heal and recover after the loss of someone close, whether in death or connection.

Loss of life can be more traumatic if it is sudden or unexpected. Loss of connection could be the result of losing a loved one to drug addiction or incarceration. Both types of loss can be emotionally devastating, especially for children whose coping skills have yet to mature, which can lead to negative behaviors and continue the cycle of violence.

Its programs are overwhelmed by the homicide rate in Baltimore. Roberta's House will serve more than 1,500 individuals this year, from helping police with notification of the victim's family to helping expectant mothers through miscarriages and infant deaths to, more than ever, helping children learn to cope with the sudden loss of a parent, sibling, safety and security.

We've begun a capital campaign to raise money to build a state-of-the-art grief support center.

CR: How is your effort to solve food deserts in Baltimore City going?

MARCH: Unfortunately, Apples and Oranges Fresh Food Market failed. The reality of bringing fresh vegetables and healthful alternatives to underserved communities remains an economic and cultural challenge. The cost to eat healthy requires a certain income. Because we were a small store, we could not purchase at the same volume discount enjoyed by big stores.

The next time, it needs to be a non-profit store to qualify for more help for the mission.

CR: Favorite saint?

MARCH: St. Francis of Assisi. He seemed cool with animals and humanity, and I took his name at confirmation. I'm rooting for the canonization of Mother Mary Lange, the founder of both the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first order of black nuns, and St. Frances Academy in Baltimore.

*Read more Coffee & Doughnuts profiles **here**.*

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