

# Kentucky chaplain brings God's love to the horse racing track

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Daisy Baez walks along the rows of barns on the backside of Churchill Downs before day breaks on a Wednesday two weeks before the 144th running of the Kentucky Derby, the world's most famous horse race.

On the first Saturday of May, all eyes will be on the prized thoroughbreds who will vie for the blanket of roses at the end of the mile-and-a-quarter race.

But beforehand, hundreds of men and women are walking, grooming, exercising and riding the majestic animals.

Baez, 24, floats through the barns with a buoyant step despite the 40-degree temperature. She greets the primarily Latino workers in their native Spanish. She lingers in the barns, asking the workers how their children are doing and inquires about one woman's spouse while checking to see if she's feeling better after an illness.

Baez is a part-time chaplain at Christ Chapel, an interdenominational church that sits on the backside of race track. A Dominican Republic native and a graduate student at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Baez has served at the chapel for two years. She started as a volunteer before being hired as associate chaplain in 2017.

Her unyielding faith in God, she said, propels her from day to day with confidence.

"When I first started, I didn't feel capable. I thought someone else could do it better, but the Lord made it possible," she told The Record, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Louisville. "I was a little scared. This work is not simple; it's important."

On Monday nights, the chapel hosts a nondenominational prayer service in English and Spanish. Afterward, volunteers offer a meal and fellowship. Baez leads a women's Bible study on Wednesday nights.

Among attendees is Soreyda Contreras, who said she feels “at peace” when she’s at Christ Chapel.

“I have a good time and feel good when I’m studying the Bible,” said Contreras, who works in the same barn as her husband, Jorge.

Baez recently expanded her ministry to include a youth group. About 10 or 11 teens meet with volunteers while Baez leads the women’s study.

“The older kids have so many questions. They are so thirsty and are looking for answers,” she said. “I’m impressed to see how God is working in their lives.”

She said she considers her ministry to those who labor on the backside a privilege and hopes she provides some sort of spiritual care to those she serves.

“One of the challenges of this ministry is that these people are in transition all of the time,” Baez noted.

“Sometimes I look back and think, ‘Did I give them the Gospel? Was I faithful to my main responsibility?’ It gives a sense of urgency to the ministry,” she said.

On average, 600 to 700 people work on the backside. During derby season, that number grows to about 1,000. More and more women, Baez said, can be found caring for the sleek animals.

Baez is one of a trio of chaplains at Christ Chapel. The team includes Dan Hatfield and Joseph Del Rosario. All three are fluent in English and Spanish.

In all, about 30 churches of many faiths regularly volunteer time and resources to the ministry. Among Catholic parishes involved are Epiphany, Our Lady of Lourdes, and St. Edward in Louisville and St. Gregory in Samuels, Kentucky.

Christy Martin, a parishioner of Our Lady of Lourdes Church, has volunteered regularly since 2014. Her work with workers’ children “energizes” her soul, she said.

Since Baez began working at the chapel, Martin said, the ministry has swelled.

“It has flourished. Daisy is young and very energetic — physically and spiritually,” she said. “Daisy shines with the light of the Lord and it is quite evident by the way she shepherds families.”

Muffy Sinclair, a parishioner of Epiphany Church and longtime volunteer, said the ministry to women and children provides a foundation on which the kids can base their lives, she said.

“In an age of uncertainty about the future for immigrants, this ministry is a comforting and loving space for them, where they can build a relationship with Jesus Christ,” Sinclair said.

Epiphany became involved with the backside in 2004. The Epiphany Backside Ministry serves five to six meals per month and stocks paper products for meals and food for a pantry.

Volunteers also collect and purchase clothing, linens, toiletries and socks for the clothing closet. And, at Christmastime, the parish ministry team donates presents to the children.

Christ Chapel is sponsored by the Kentucky Race Track Chaplaincy, which serves race tracks in Kentucky and southern Ohio.

*Copyright ©2018 Catholic News Service/U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.*