

New head of Covenant House glad to ‘come home’ to work he loves

WASHINGTON – Kevin Ryan, the new president and CEO of Covenant House, is no stranger to the pressing needs today’s troubled youths are facing.

Mr. Ryan, the new president of the international Catholic organization that serves homeless and runaway youths, has been helping teens since he graduated from law school and spent 10 years working at Covenant House locations in New York and New Jersey.

Mr. Ryan also has worked as a youth advocate in the New Jersey government where he reformed the state’s child welfare system as commissioner of the Department of Children and Families.

In his new role, which officially begins in early February, he will oversee a program with 21 shelters and programs throughout the United States and five other countries. Covenant House, which served 70,000 youths last year, is the largest privately funded agency in the Americas providing services to homeless youths.

For Mr. Ryan, returning to Covenant House gives him a chance to “come home to the work I love.” But the 42-year-old also is awed by the responsibility that he finds “terrifically humbling.”

In the 1990s, when he was working on the streets of New York City with Covenant House teens, he said he “never in a million years” imagined he would one day be asked to lead the international organization.

Since its founding in 1969 by Franciscan Father Bruce Ritter, Covenant House has always been led by a religious.

Father Ritter, who died in 1999, resigned in 1990 after accusations of sexual and financial improprieties. Sister Mary Rose McGeady, a Daughter of Charity, led the organization from 1990 to 2003, and Sister Patricia Cruise, a Sister of Charity, was president 2003-08.

Sister McGeady in a statement described Mr. Ryan as the “perfect choice” to head Covenant House, calling him a “tireless fighter, a courageous believer in doing what’s right and a passionate believer in the dignity and beauty of every child.”

After Mr. Ryan accepted his new job he was quick to get Sister McGeady’s advice, which included the admonition to always remember that the agency was doing “God’s work.”

Mr. Ryan, the eldest of six sons, said he and his brothers were raised with a “really strong orientation of the connection of our faith and our obligation to public service. My Catholic faith is the greatest gift my parents gave me,” he added.

He came to a deeper understanding of what it meant to practice one’s faith during his college years at The Catholic University of America in Washington where he met his wife, Clare. They both worked on the wait staff at the priests’ dining hall and had the chance to spend time talking with prominent church leaders, all of whom have now died, including: Monsignor George Higgins, known as America’s labor priest, church historian Monsignor John Tracy Ellis and Jesuit Father Avery Dulles, before he became cardinal.

“These priests mentored us and reminded us of the great church tradition of the preferential option for the poor,” he said. They also spoke highly of the work the church does throughout the world in providing for those in need.

The Ryans, with the dining-room conversations long behind them, now have six children ranging in age from 3 to 17.

And Kevin Ryan no longer needs anyone to remind him of the church’s successful ministries. He sees this work in person and is more convinced than ever that it must continue.

“The church has the greatest tradition of creating social justice for the poor and there is not a close second,” Ryan told Catholic News Service in a Jan. 16 telephone interview. “This tradition of lifting up the poor is not just companionship but transforming work that heals, teaches and gives people opportunities to transform their lives.”