

Young adults bring new life to Highlandtown parish

Before young adults began moving into the Highlandtown neighborhoods surrounding St. Elizabeth of Hungary in the last few years, Mildred Steibe never heard a baby cry at Mass.

Wailing babies are now commonplace in the church - much to the delight of longtime parishioners, such as 86-year-old Steibe.

"I never saw young people around here before," Steibe said. "They are starting to come in and they're trying to do things for the parish. It's really nice because the elderly parishioners are dying off."

Young and old came together Aug. 7 to mark the 100th anniversary of the building of the current church. The celebration came exactly one day after the centennial anniversary of the laying of the church's cornerstone.

Bishop William C. Newman, a former associate pastor, celebrated the anniversary Mass, which was followed by a block party complete with live music, face painting, crafts, carnival wheels and games.

Old-timers reminisced about St. Elizabeth's glory days, when it was one of the largest parishes in the archdiocese with more than 1,500 children enrolled in the now-closed school. They also embraced the presence of newcomers who are injecting new life into the parish by organizing events such as the neighborhood block party.

"It's always been the people that made this place what it is," said Third Order Regular Franciscan Father Robert Sisk, pastor. "They are aware that God is with them."

The priest quipped that St. Elizabeth's location, across from the expansive Patterson Park, is another of its many assets.

“No other parish has a front lawn like us,” he said with a smile.

Justin Sapp, a 30-year-old parishioner, said he has visited other churches inside and outside the Catholic faith but feels most at home at St. Elizabeth.

“I feel like St. E’s represents everything that a community parish used to – and should – be,” Sapp said.

The church buildings are well maintained, he said, and parishioners have a welcoming spirit and sense of charity that sets St. Elizabeth apart. His community is one that provides food for hundreds every week through a pantry “without a single cent in the budget.”

“There has been an influx of young people, striving for a greater purpose in our community,” Sapp said, “looking for meaningful projects and ways to be involved.”

Young people help coordinate holiday decorating for Christmas and Easter. They also volunteer to paint, put up drywall, organize the summer concert series and community events – in addition to participating in a Catholic identity series and book club, he said.

“St. E’s has a great history,” Sapp said, “and there are so many in our history who remember everything that the church – this church – and our faith can mean to someone.”

Father Sisk senses a strong feeling of optimism among parishioners about the future of their 434-family faith community.

“It’s a vibrant parish,” he said. “They want to keep this place going.”