

## Priest home at Cathedral

bbrown@theadvertiser.com • Sometimes you just know. • August 22, 2010

### Bruce Brown

The Rev. Chester Arceneaux, who is settling into his new role as pastor at [St. John's Cathedral](#), knew from an early age that the priesthood was his calling.

"From the beginning, the vocation was in my heart," Arceneaux said. "When I was 5 years old, I would play priest. I would perform marriages for my sisters, long before I had the chance to do so as an adult, and I would make hosts out of Evangeline Maid bread."

What seemed like a foregone conclusion took its own path, however, before Arceneaux was ordained June 13, 1992, in ceremonies at St. John's.

"Growing up, you're informed by your peers," he said. "And to them, the priesthood was not cool. As I entered junior high and high school, I always thought I would be a priest. But then you start to date, and that changes."

"I had been dating a girl for a year, a year and a half, and she asked me what I wanted to be. I told her I had wanted to be a priest, and she said, 'What stopped you?'"

"That caused confusion, and I had to be honest with myself. That was the beginning of my discernment."

Arceneaux was working as a postal carrier and still searching for his path in life when he visited Father Louis Richard, then a vocational director with the Diocese of Lafayette, on a lunch break. Within four months he had started the process to become a priest.

"You have to go answer the question in your heart," said Arceneaux, who served at St. Theresa in Abbeville before spending the past eight years at Our Lady of Wisdom Church and Catholic Center on the campus of the University of Louisiana-Lafayette.

Arceneaux, who turns 50 in September, was named to the St. John's post in May by Bishop Michael Jarrell and is the first person of color in that

position.

While at Wisdom, Arceneaux directed a \$500,000 renovation project that was capped in 2007, marking Wisdom's 65 years at the school. Phase II was begun last year, and Arceneaux was eager to see that through.

"Many people are drawn to the community at Wisdom," he said. "It gives you hope for our future that students want to grow in a deeper reality in faith. It was a great privilege to serve there."

Tears were shed, both from Arceneaux and church members, when it was time for him to leave.

"It's amazing how much he grew the ministry," said Wisdom ministry member Amy Stout. "He was like a father figure, in disciplining them, loving them and joking with them."

"Students came to him and he inspired them. He always provided for them, and he wasn't afraid to take risks. He's a big idea guy, eager for new ideas. We became good friends."

Juan Pagan is another who enjoyed working with Arceneaux.

"He was a true father for much of the students and staff," Pagan said. "He was that person to look up to. We would come to him with an idea of something we wanted to do, and he said, 'Let me pray on it.' He

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would let us know his decision, and often it was the best decision.

"He was very protective of his kids, particularly in crisis. He would check up on them, and always had an open door."

"Every day, you never know how the Lord will use you," Arceneaux said. "I would be walking on campus, and see students with tattoos, pierces and an agenda, yet they were seeking spirituality. You can't judge by appearances. You have to see their heart.

"It was a wonderful experience, but difficult. You love them, but then they move on. It's a changing community. It is a wonderful thing to see them marry off, or go on to graduate school."

Just as change is inevitable in a college ministry, the diocese assigns priests on a six-year basis, so Arceneaux knew he would leave eventually.

"I wanted to finish what we were doing with the physical plant," he said. "Before, we were dependent upon the diocese. Now, Wisdom is financially stable for the future.

"It is difficult. I live each day. I ask for wisdom, to do the best I can do each day, and for strength from the Holy Spirit to endure."

Arceneaux sees himself as a pastoral priest, rather than a liturgist, a hands-on person who thrives on interaction and contact. He is still taken aback by his living quarters and his spacious office, but has quickly found a new home in the hearts of St. John's parishioners.

"There has been overwhelming hospitality," he said. "People have welcomed me and invited me into their lives. I've asked six or seven families to share dinner with me so I can get to know names and connect with the kids. It's been wonderful."

School duty posts and other responsibilities next door at Cathedral-Carmel School offer more chances to connect and become familiar to his new community, admittedly more natural to the Lafayette native than administrative tasks.

"I've had to learn to direct the people you love,"

Arceneaux said. "But work has to be done, and order is needed."

Arceneaux used to deliver mail in White Subdivision, long a source of St. John's parishioners along with the Saints Street area. Changing demographics may help revitalize that dynamic.

"Many of the people who lived in those areas have passed," Arceneaux said. "But I see young families moving back in there now, and I have a passion for that. I want to get young people involved, so that in six to 12 years it can be again a strong family community built for the future.

"There are always peaks and valleys with such things. You need a fire to get people involved. Hopefully that's why I came here."

At the same time, Arceneaux is not apt to institute full-scale alterations.

"There is a fear of change, people saying 'he's going to come in and change everything,' but I have adapted myself," Arceneaux said. "It's not about me coming in and changing things. I'm here to love them, and move them to a deeper love for the Lord.

"You have to be authentic and real to your background."

Arceneaux recognizes the historical significance of his assignment, as a Creole with Native American, French, African and Haitian, Canadian and German

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in his bloodlines.

His great grandfather was Carencro's Sostain Arceneaux, who worked with Sr. Katharine Drexel to form one of the first schools for women of color and whose sister was a Holy Family nun.

There are connections to Bishop Jeanmard and to Holy Rosary, and Arceneaux has served as co-director of the Office of Black Catholics.

But **parents** Charles and Nellie Arceneaux and other family members taught him values that bridged racial differences.

"In our neighborhood, if you had an elderly person, we were taught to take their trash to the street or to rake their yard," Arceneaux said. "You have this family, but there is a greater family.

"We were taught to treat everybody the same."

That background informed Arceneaux's choice to become a priest, which continues to be rewarding in its latest challenge.

"Bishop Harry Flynn once said, 'If I had 100 lives to live, I'd like to live all of them as a priest,' and that struck me at the time," Arceneaux said. "Now that I've been a priest for 18 years, I understand.

"There's no greater vocation than to reveal your heart to the Lord."



The Rev. Chester Arceneaux, pastor of St. John's Cathedral, knew he wanted to be a priest from a young age.

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