

FaithLife Stories: Niles Rankin

Niles Rankin is a 17 year-old junior at Plymouth Whitemarsh High School. The son of OMC parishioner Jessica Rankin, Niles is a sacristan in our church and is a member of his high school swim team, plays the trumpet in the school concert, jazz and marching bands and works as a year-round lifeguard at the Greater Plymouth Community Center. Last summer, he went to Costa Rica on a community service trip.

“I’m a sacristan now and I was an altar server when I was younger, in fourth grade. I liked the concept of helping to prepare the Mass. I didn’t want to just sit in the pews; I wanted to be right up there with the priests, the musicians and the people who represent our faith.

“Receiving the Eucharist is a purifying experience. You have to wait every week to eat it, not like everyday food. At communion, I focus on becoming one in the Body of Christ. It’s a reminder that God and Jesus will always be with you. It helps me to feel good about myself. When I feel lost, they bring me back.

“I am Catholic because I was brought into the faith and it gives me closure about myself. I listen to the things the priests say and I take those words out of the church. Like one of the priests told us not be selfish and to share with others as a way to build our religion.

“I was in the CCD class for kids from the public schools. In fact, I met my best friend there. Some of the kids I would often see in church then but now I see them less and less often. I think kids become more independent in high school and are not as fascinated by the church. For instance, my best friend doesn’t come anymore. When you’re younger, you’re forced to come. A lot of kids stop coming because they think religion is proven false by science.

“I stay faithful because of my belief in my God and I look to Him for guidance. Without God, I wouldn’t know what to believe in life. Here’s my experience of God at communion: if you give, you will receive again.

“Prayer seems like a one-sided conversation because He doesn’t talk back. It’s like a wish but you have to take action. He will show you how to get there but you have to take the steps yourself. Faith serves as guidance. I live my life to help impact other people to make them feel better about themselves.

“When I have conversations with friends about religion, it’s stuff like, ‘Does God exist?’ I think of God as the Creator of life and that’s how everything got here. Someone said there must be life because I see it in the people around me. God is constantly guiding me to be better than I already am, both mentally and physically.

“I’ve always been interested in art and I feel like God is guiding me artistically. It started as a sketch notebook, but now I realize I have to start working on perspective drawing and so I pay much more attention in class.

“The people who have influenced me the most definitely include my mom, the priests here at OMC, especially Father Bob, Deacon Joe, and my godmother Paula, who has since passed away. She was nice and loving all the time and was an example of how a Christian is supposed to be.

“The things that challenge my faith are the bad things that happen in the world, like murder and assault. These make me question where God is in that moment. I think God watches us and expects people to do the right thing and if they don’t, it’s because they’ve lost their way.

“I went on a community service trip to Costa Rica last summer. I found out about it when the group came to the masses here at OMC to fundraise. The organization is not specifically Catholic but it used to be run by an OMC parishioner. The other kids in my group were all from Philadelphia public schools and were really nice and really accepted me. A lot of them were African-American, which was a new experience and really opened me up. I’m half African-American but I’m from the suburbs and I haven’t figured out what that means to me yet.

“It was an incredible bonding experience between us and the local people. We stayed in the homes of local families. The house I stayed in was completely made from wood planks and had no hot water. At home, I always take really hot showers; in Costa Rica, it was a quick in and out.

“We did two main service projects: we renovated an elementary school playground and we started to build a greenhouse at a nature center. One of my jobs was to build a platform under a big barrel that collected rain water to make it sort of a water tower. The way Jesus helped people was my inspiration during this trip.”