African-American Catholic group to mark centennial

BY RUTH HFOOTE
Special to The Advocate

LAFAYETTE — Sherman Malveaux considers himself a worker in God's vineyard.

"That's just who I am and what I do," Malveaux said.

But the 75-year-old Lafayette native also is grand knight of the Knights of Peter Claver's St. Paul Council No. II, which will celebrate 100 years of black Catholic church in the area.

"It was almost like automatic when I got to be 7 years old," said Malveaux, the son of a former grand knight.

"There was an initiation coming up," he recalled. "I didn't know what that meant. It was something that happened. It wasn't like I asked." Instead, Malveaux's father decided for him, a decision Malveaux says he is grateful for today because he considers it something of a rite of passage.

"I look at it like that in some ways," he said. "There were expectations not by me but by my father."

Nonetheless, it had an impact on him. "Being a junior knight was part of the whole Catholic thing we went through as young boys," he said.

Having the Rev. A.J. McKnight later as the first black pastor also impacted the Knights at St. Paul Catholic Church, according to Malveaux.

"We had never had an African-American priest," he said.

McKnight promoted youth involvement, including Bible discussions, baseball and church baskets.

Being a part of the group promoted camaraderie.

"It was like you belonged to something," Malveaux said. "You had things to do — it was not like sitting around the house and playing marbles."

For Malveaux, the Junior Knights helped to mold him. That was why re-establishing a young group was one of the first things he did when he returned and took over high command.

As he reflected on his past, Malveaux said there was even a time that he considered becoming a priest himself. But he said he knew after his second year that it was not to be his calling.

Instead, he found his calling with the Knights. The whole reason for the Knights is to work for the church, for the needy in the community, to work with your pastor, things he's trying to do," Malveaux said.

That's what Malveaux continues to do even though the number of knights has shrunk over time.

One of the Knights' missions today is to help their priest, the Rev. Robert Seay, who also is a knight, raise funds to build a well in Nigeria so poor people can have fresh water.

Malveaux said the fundraising effort was triggered by a visit to St. Paul Catholic Church by a Nigerian priest who shared the deplorable conditions in his country that he said were leading to disease and death.

"It seemed like that is something for the Knights to be about," Malveaux said.

The Knights' goal is to follow the path of their namesake — St. Peter Claver, a Spanish Jesuit priest and missionary considered the patron saint of slaves.

As leader, Malveaux also is aware of other pressing issues, including encouraging more young people to become involved in the Knights organization so it can continue for another 100 years. He said he hopes the celebration will encourage young men to join.

Malveaux was a time when, as a young man, he left the Knights and no longer considered himself a member. When he returned, he learned his father had continued to pay his dues.

"That is why I'm so dedicated to the organization today. He had the faith in me that I had lost," he said. "And that's really what my dedication to the organization is all about. I'm a worker and I'm happy to do it."

Whether serving as a small-business adviser, a community housing development specialist or a counselor for the summer youth program, Malveaux is pleased that his career, as well as his role in the Knights, has allowed him to do what so many people dream of doing when they grow up: helping people.

"That's exactly what I did with my life," he said.

Just recently, Malveaux found himself being drawn to visit his father's grave. He didn't realize it then, but he arrived on the day of his father's birthday. He took that as a special sign.

"Knowing my dad, I know he would be proud of what I've done with my life as a knight," he said.

Even though Malveaux served in several commander positions, he never aspired for a national office in the organization, nor considered political office.

"There's enough to do at home," he said, "and maybe more than we can handle.

The Knights will be part of Malveaux's life. He remains committed to them as he does to his family, which includes wife Agnes, and their two children, Jon Eric and Nicole.

Hilda Wiltz, who serves as the vice supreme lady for the state chapter and second-in-command nationally, said Malveaux has done a lot for the council and the community. "Sherman is a force," Wiltz said. "He's the glue that holds the council together."

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The church, which celebrated its centennial in 2012, meant that black people no longer had to stand in the back of St. John Cathedral during services. They now had their own church.

Although the Knights of Peter Claver's council came into existence after the church, Malveaux said some may equate their arrival with the chicken and the egg: Which came first? He's content that they arrived together.

A junior namesake of his father, Malveaux followed in his father's footsteps when he joined the Knights of Peter Claver.

"My dad was a knight," he said. "It was almost like automatic when I got to be 7 years old." Following his communion, he became a junior knight.

"There was an initiation coming up," he recalled. "I didn't know what that meant. It was something that happened. It wasn't like I asked."

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