



Legacy alive in Jenkins - Mother Teresa touches mountains

JENKINS, Ky. - Hear the prayers of an Eastern Kentucky coal town:

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In the tired rumble of a loaded coal truck gearing down on Old Hill No. 4 - a prayer for a miner.
In the way Nina Rose down at the Cavalier Cafe calls people honey - a prayer for Main Street.
In the hushed whispers and faint singing inside, the little white house on Cove Road - a prayer for Mother Teresa.

Jenkins, a forlorn little town whose fortunes plummeted with the closing of the big mines, has an unlikely connection to the frail, 86-year-old nun. In 1982, Mother Teresa opened a Missionaries of Charity home, one of 400 worldwide, on a mountainside near downtown Jenkins. She has visited this town twice, in 1982 and several years later on her way to a speaking engagement in Louisville. The second time, she sneaked in from an airport in Virginia, riding through the mountains in a big, American car with two of her local nuns and Father Edward Randall, the 74-year-old pastor of St. George Catholic Church in Jenkins.

Jenkins declining

Now Mother Teresa is in declining health, and her four sisters who work out of the Missionaries of Charity house in Jenkins took time out from visiting the sick and the poor Monday morning to hold a special prayer service for her in the house on Cove Road. For all it lacks and all it has lost, Jenkins doesn't need more heartbreak. Nestled in the mountains, hard by the Virginia border, this is a dying town whose population dropped from 3,271 to 2,751 between 1980 and 1990. Its unemployment rate stands at almost 8 percent, and there's no way to get there, save for winding through hills and hollers past a state park called Kingdom Come. Jenkins, you see, has little going for it but the grace of God and the heart of a saint. And now that saint is sick.

Mother Teresa, Nobel laureate and founder of the Missionaries of Charity, suffered a mild heart attack Nov. 22 and has struggled ever since to regain her health.

Prayers said

Monday morning, the four Jenkins nuns - two from India, one from Italy and one from Indiana - kicked off their sandals and knelt praying for her on the pale green carpet in the little chapel adjacent to their house. They hold a special prayer service for Mother Teresa whenever the Bronx Missionaries of Charity home calls and tells them it's time. They don't keep up with the news, don't have a television or subscribe to a newspaper. It's against the rules.

Sometimes they find out what's happening in the world when they call on the people of Letcher County, spreading the word of God and tending to the needy. Most of the people here are Protestant, with Baptist and Christian churches predominating. "We care where you spend eternity," are the words painted on a street front window downtown along Ky. 119. It looks like a funeral home, but it's Emmanuel Baptist Church. Up the road, beside the buildings of the abandoned high school, sits the Methodist church. Over on the side of a mountain, is St. George Catholic Church.

At dusk on Wednesday night, smoke rose in a thin, ghostly finger from the chimney of the parish hall as the nuns approached the church for Mass. They walked down Cove Road and across Ky. 119 - known in Jenkins as the Trail of the Lonesome Pine. Then they crossed broken railroad tracks and a footbridge over a rushing creek before climbing stairs up the mountainside toward the church. Night comes early in Eastern Kentucky. It was an hour still before the Dollar General Store would close, but the sun had disappeared behind the massive range of the Appalachian Mountains, and the last light of day was fading to black behind the Polly & Craft Funeral Home.

In the Cavalier Cafe, where you can get a meatloaf sandwich for \$1.50, owner Joe Eddie Eversole was putting his spaghetti sauce on to cook - for the next night. (It has to cook a long time to be good.) And Nina Rose was tending to customers. To the assistant police chief at the counter, who'd ordered a cheeseburger and fries, she said: "We got a different kind of potato this time. It's hard to get 'em real brown. You care?"

To a regular customer, who'd called on the phone asking what the daily special held in store, she said: "Honey, we got pork chops, macaroni and cheese, fried cabbage and peas." You won't see the nuns in here, but Ms. Rose has seen them elsewhere in the town. "You see them out all the time, going up and down the street," she said. "I don't know them. They're not real sociable. They just kind of stick to their work."

Letcher County has no Salvation Army, no community outreach programs for the needy, no emergency funds for those in crisis, Father Randall said. The nuns fill a big void, and they do it in a quiet, unassuming way. It's against the rules to talk to reporters, said Sister Mariam, the superior sister of the Jenkins home.

Father Randall, however, does not hesitate to speak of the valuable work the sisters do. He was in Jenkins for two years before the Missionaries of Charity home was started. In a few months, the nuns "knew more people and covered more territory than I did in two years." "They go fishing around in the hills and bring people in" for services at the Catholic Church, Father Randall said. They also dispense food and clothing, a job Father Randall had all to himself before the home opened 14 years ago. "Every morning at 9 a.m., out they go," Father Randall said. "They have a van and they're not the least bit reluctant to go to some of these places I wouldn't go to." They've cleaned widows' houses, installed insulation and changed bandages on bedridden patients.

When the nuns arrived, most of the big mines still were open, though many were in decline. A short time later, many had closed up shop, throwing countless miners out of work and starting Jenkins on a downward spiral. It was a town in need of a miracle even Mother Teresa couldn't deliver. Now it appears she is the one in need of a miracle, and Wednesday night four nuns in a forgotten Kentucky town remembered her in silent prayer at the church on the mountainside.

"Hear the prayers of the family you have gathered here before you," Father Randall said softly as a coal truck rumbled past outside bound for Pikeville. When the nuns left the church to return home, walking along the road down from No. 4 Hill and across the Trail of the Lonesome Pine, it was dark. The abandoned train station, the abandoned high school and the abandoned Ashland station all might simply have been closed for the night and the great bulk of the mountains had disappeared into darkness as if, somehow, the town actually had managed to shed its ancient burden.

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