



St. Rita Graduate Father Michael Depcik

In January, someone paid students at St. Rita School for the Deaf a special visit. Students had the opportunity to meet and speak with Father Mike Depcik, a 1988 St. Rita Graduate. Father Depcik spent a couple of days giving inspirational talks and sharing with students the importance of developing and nurturing a relationship with God. "Everyone needs a spiritual life", he told the kids. Most students responded very well and listened intently to what he had to say. They felt a real connection to him because he spoke their language and also attended St. Rita. His advice to them that day was to love yourself no matter what issues you are facing in your life. Advice he obviously follows himself. It is

through acceptance that personal courage and self confidence can take shape. Which is just what Father Depcik needed to find the strength to leave his familiar world that he had always known behind, to do the work he knew he wanted to do.

Father Mike Depcik grew up in Chicago with a deaf family of seven. His mother graduated from St. Rita School for the Deaf in 1956 and wanted her children to attend her alma mater. Father Depcik began his education at St. Rita in 1982, where he said he enjoyed the academic challenge. He participated in many extracurricular activities. He was involved with student government, drama, yearbook, and even served as class president. Sr. John Michael, who is now the Academic Dean, and Pat Sweeney, who teaches math, were among some of his favorite teachers. He called them outstanding to be exact.

Upon graduation, Father Depcik thought he wanted to go into teaching or social work. He had a desire to work directly with people, helping them in some way. His interests took him to Gallaudet University, where he received a bachelor degree in secondary education and history. It was there that he met an influential chaplain who encouraged him to consider becoming a priest. After a lot of thinking, he made the decision to devote the rest of his life to serving others. In 1995, Father Depcik joined the religious congregation that he is currently a part of, the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales in Detroit, Michigan. "I hope to be a Michigander for the rest of my life! I love it there and have adopted it as my home state."

It is obvious that Father Depcik enjoys what he does and is happy with the path he has chosen for his life, but the road hasn't been easy. He has faced many struggles, sometimes even opposition from some people in the church. There are not many deaf priests and very few deaf parishes. Father Depcik often found that his deafness made him a minority among hearing people who were not familiar with the deaf or the deaf culture. "To join religious life means I had to give up my deaf world", said Father Depcik. Growing up in a deaf family, going to a deaf school, and socializing with other deaf people, provided him much security and comfort. He said his deafness didn't feel like a handicap because it was something they all had in common. He never experienced being left out. But now Father Depcik must play an active role in both the deaf and hearing worlds. He obviously spends much of his time ministering to the deaf. But he lives in an Oblate house with a few other members, all of which are hearing. A couple of them have made an effort to learn sign language so Father Depcik can communicate with them and feel like part of the community. But although communication has improved, Father Depcik said it will never be like living with other deaf people who understand and are a part of the deaf culture.

There is much work and improvement needed in the area of Deaf Ministry, which is what Father Depcik has dedicated his life to. Since last August he has had the privilege of leading his own deaf congregation. What began as nine people huddled together in a borrowed church hall with florescent lights and folding chairs, has now grown into something to be proud of. There are currently about thirty members and the numbers keep climbing. In February they were very excited to move into their very own new chapel. The church didn't have a priest for fifteen years, so Father Depcik will be spending a lot of time re-building and strengthening the congregation. One of his goals for the future is to videotape his masses, homilies, and retreat talks for the many deaf churches across the country that are priestless.