



Seeking His Strength

How do we seek His strength? Vanessa Russell, CEO of Catholic Charities Atlanta, shared at BELIEVES on July 14th that His strength is sought in many ways.



“Imagine in the middle of the night an armed guard knocks on your door and says to get out of your house now,” said Russell. “You get your kids and are driven across a border and into a UN refugee camp.”

Russell said this story is one that refugees all around the world face.

“Refugee camps are run by the United Nations. When there, you are assigned a designated living area usually not larger than about 12x8 ft. – and if you are lucky, it is a cement pad,” she said. “Everyone gets a blue tarp that acts as a roof. You get a ration of water a week. If you lose your water container you have to barter. Food is also rationed and is usually a dried rice packet.

According to Russell the mortality rate for kids under the age of 5 in camps is high. There are roughly 12 million people in refugee camps all over the world. The average stay is 10 years, with only about 1% getting relocated each year. Thanks to the work of the US Conference of Bishops, refugees get resettled by Catholic Charities organizations across the U.S.

“They come with whatever is in a white bag that you can hold in your hands,” Russell told the BELIEVES attendees.

The goal of Catholic Charities Atlanta is to have the family up and running, integrated, and on their own in 9 months. Russell said they do this with a success rate between 88% and 92%.

“As a refugee, if your child is over the age of 18 and your parents are in the camp with you, chances are you will be resettled separately.” Resettlement agencies try to reunite families but sometimes that takes time.”

Those who are refugees and those who serve them through Catholic Charities all are called to seek His strength.

The story of Catholic Charities is the story of the Good Samaritan,” said Russell. “We are the innkeeper for those in need. We are the charitable arm of the Archdiocese of Atlanta.”

Since 1953, Catholic Charities Atlanta has served more than 1 million people in need. In 2014 alone, over 16,866 clients were served by both staff and the more than 1,000 volunteers who gave 17,739 hours of service during the year. 92% of the people Catholic Charities serves are low income and 75% live in poverty, just like the more than 300 refugees that are resettled each year by Catholic Charities.

Russell described the work of Catholic Charities as a “three-legged stool.”

They not only help get immigrants resettled, but they also provide some immigration legal services for children , as well as family stabilization services – serving not only parents and families but also children and veterans.

“The work we do with veterans is difficult because they come to us in very vulnerable situations. You would think Veterans have benefits right?” commented Russell, “but for many, getting those benefits is very complicated and they need help.”

The work Russell and her staff do with children is also equally challenging and a lot of work. By the time the children arrive, they have very serious emotional wounds and issues. All the attorneys at Catholic Charities work on children’s cases.

“Most of the kids we help are called ‘train kids.’ They board a train – on top of it – and ride throughout South America until they get to the United States. They make this dangerous trip in order to flee terrible situations in their home country. This trip could take months, it could take years. Girls make this trip we are told, but we don’t see many who make it here. These children have been abandoned and most are emotionally traumatized.”

She summarized, “We try to help these children and the families who take them in.”

Russell, a parishioner at All Saints in Dunwoody, didn’t always know she would one day be leading Catholic Charities Atlanta. In fact, she said that getting on the Board in the beginning was really her husband’s fault.

Yet, getting involved in Catholic Charities Atlanta, first as a part of the Board five years ago, and then leading the organization as its CEO has proven to all be part of His plan.



“I come from a big family of seven children – 22 people alone in our immediate family – so every other Christmas we all get together. I typically drive to get pick up my parents who are in their 80s and take them to where we gather,” Russell shared.

Christmas 2013 was to be particularly special for the extended family because the last grandchild was to get baptized.

“So I went to pick up my parents but when I arrived at their home, my dad said, ‘I am not doing well. I have gone to the doctor to get tests but won’t know the results until after Christmas. You kids are going to have to learn how to have family events without us.’”

Nevertheless, Russell’s parents got in the car and went with her for the family gathering. January 3rd, Russell’s father went to the doctor after she had brought him home. He called her later that day and said there was really bad news.

“From January 6 to March 18, I spent about 10 days in Atlanta and the rest with my parents – including the pilgrimage to MD Anderson in Houston that so many know,” said Russell. “The journey was exhausting. I was exhausted.”

Following the passing of her father in mid-March of that year, Russell came back to Atlanta and turned her attention back to her life here.

“At this time, Catholic Charities was knocking at the door saying, ‘Hey, you’ve been missing in action. You’re Vice Chair of the Board, and we need to do some planning for the upcoming year” she said. “I told them, ‘I am exhausted and need some time to take care of me.’”

In late July 2014, the then CEO of Catholic Charities Atlanta came to meet with Vanessa and the Chairman of the Board.

“He told us, ‘I am resigning. I need to take care of my parents who are not well,’” stated Russell. “So as the only Board member without a 9-to-5 job, I felt an obligation to step in, but only on an interim basis.”

As Russell talked to others about the latest development, everyone including her mom, husband, and friends encouraged her to apply for the job full time. Yet, she told them all she was not up to the challenge.

“I told them all, ‘You don’t understand, I have no emotional energy left.’”

Nevertheless, she took the role on an interim basis for several months, and then on March 1 of this year, officially became CEO of Catholic Charities Atlanta.

Russell paused for a moment, and then recalled the moment when she arrived at the hospital the day her father died to communicate a key message.

“At the hospital, my mom and I missed being there for my dad’s last moments by 45 minutes and this was particularly distressful to me. The priest who had been with us throughout this time tried to console me, but I was very upset. Finally, he said, ‘Oh, you’re one of those.’ I asked him what he meant and he said, ‘You’re one who is used to being in control. This isn’t about you being in control. This happened as it should – it is part of His plan. You’re part of His plan. This caused me to pause and reflect on the events of the past months and his message has stayed with me to this day.’”

In Catholic Charities Atlanta she has healed, and has put things in perspective. According to her, it has not been so much about giving in, but rather being in the moment, listening, being aware, and seeing her part in the plan.

She added, “So when the CEO role became full-time, it wasn’t about what I wanted, it was about what He wanted. The organization does as much for me as I have for it. It’s an opportunity to serve.”

“When I married my husband, I told him that at 40 I was going to retire, but then 40 became 45, and then 50. It was all about me wanting to do something for me – selfish.” “I consider this to be the biggest job that God’s prepared me for and I am thankful for this opportunity to be of service” said Russell.

After sharing how she has sought His strength throughout her journey, professionally and personally, Russell opened the floor up for questions.



"I'm an Army brat too," said CTK parishioner Walter Kozik. "Your story is very interesting filled with lots of internal blossoming power that anyone can do whatever's inside. There's tremendous potential."

Kozik added that he was also amazed to learn from Russell of what all Catholic Charities does.

Someone else in attendance at BELIEVES then asked Russell how Catholic Charities connects to the parishes. She said the key has been to connect through ministries.

"One example is a ministry at Prince of Peace," said Russell. "When we pick up refugees, we set them up in apartment complexes in Clarkston because it's near work opportunities for them. When families come, we have to teach basics like how to use appliances or turn on showers. We also make sure no chemicals that are toxic are given to them because they may not know the dangers yet. Prince of Peace parishioners provide supplies for these families on a regular basis. It is a great help to us financially and a real help to those we serve."

A few attendees then asked Russell questions that were more personal before the session came to an end.

One attendee asked Russell if experiencing the loss of her father opened a door to help the CEO who resigned and was going through the same. Russell said that she and the prior CEO talk regularly about it.

Then Eric Maust, Business Banking Relationship Manager with JP Morgan Chase, and a graduate of the Catholic Charities Leadership Program, asked, "You talked of finding a place to be still. What things do you do?"

Russell answered, "The experience of losing someone close causes you to re-prioritize constantly. It is about setting aside time to be still. I do turn my phone off. I don't schedule anything early on Mondays, or after noon on Friday to take time and remember what it is all about. I use this time to reflect on what I need to do and how the week went, what I could do better. Also it is a blessing to work in the Chancery and be able to go to Mass that is held daily at noon. This is a great opportunity for reflection."

As the questions came to an end, Russell closed by saying, "I really appreciate you guys. It is you all that enable us to do what we do. I remember Bernie Marcus once said that you learn a lot of things through your professional career – but nothing enriches you as much as serving and engaging personally in the lives of those less fortunate."