



# THE LOOP

## pizza grill

## Making Pizza, Making a Difference

by Heather Rote Faller

It's Friday night at the Eagle Harbor Loop Pizza Grill in Orange Park, Florida. "Order number 171," announces a voice over the loudspeaker. Order 171 is a bacon cheddar burger with homemade chips and a milkshake. Behind the counter, young employees are tossing salads and whipping shakes. The soda machine needs ice, another order is coming in, and the secret-recipe pizza sauce is about to bubble over.

That's when Becci Curtis ('05B), associate pastor for youth ministry at Orange Park Presbyterian Church, walks in. Curtis works at the Loop, too, but she takes orders of a different kind. She is a restaurant chaplain.

Paid by the restaurant, Curtis has a simple job description: to support the staff, whether that means chopping lettuce or conversing with an employee about a personal problem. "Some kids feel there are not a lot of people who care about them, and often they don't even know how to care for each other," she says. "This is one way to represent God's love to them. I tell them my job is to be available if they want to talk about anything." "Anything" includes school problems, credit cards, the Super Bowl, or even the manager. The conversations are completely confidential.

The idea for the restaurant chaplain is credited to Mike Schneider, cofounder and CEO of the Loop. Schneider was in the restaurant business for years before he became a Christian, and then he considered pursuing full-time ministry. He shared his struggle with a group of business executives, who suggested that perhaps the restaurant was his calling, and that he should look for opportunities to minister where he was. Nine years later, there are seven chaplains covering

Loop restaurants in Florida, with plans to expand the program to other states. The chaplains gather with a chaplain coordinator every six weeks to share experiences and get support.

Most of the restaurant chaplains are trained youth pastors. "Like many quick-service and fast-casual restaurants, many of our employees are young," says Schneider. "Many suffer from dysfunctional homes, or problems at school. The chaplains are a resource for these kids." And a witness. "What they see in our chaplains is often the only thing they see of church," he says.

The chaplains' ministry extends outside the restaurant, too. When employees started asking questions about the movie *The Passion of Christ*, Schneider paid for tickets for any employee who wanted to go, and for coffee afterward. He sees this kind of support as part of his responsibility as an employer both to his staff and to their parents, who entrust him with their children. "Parents have thanked me for the difference a chaplain made in their child's life," he says.

Nineteen-year-old Tamika Atwell, a full-time college student and a full-time service leader at the Loop where Curtis works, agrees that Curtis's presence makes a difference. "We don't always know who is talking to her, but we know people do. Everyone trusts her," Atwell says. Dani Feliciano, owner with her husband of Curtis's Loop franchise, says that finding a chaplain helped her team function better.

Feliciano adds that the purpose of the chaplain "isn't to push religion. We're Catholic," she says of her husband and herself, "not Presbyterian, but the point is finding unity, and having a chaplain creates

Photo: Becci Curtis



Photo: Matt Morgan

Becci Curtis lends a hand during the lunch rush.

a wonderful atmosphere." On the question of converting employees, Schneider is clear. "We don't hit anyone over the head with this," he says. "We have Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu employees, and they know that our chaplain can help them locate a member of their faith community. The chaplain is a conduit to assist all our employees."

For those who show interest in Christianity, Curtis is happy to share her love of Christ. After many conversations, one young employee asked her, "How do I know that I'm a Christian?" Eventually, he asked about Curtis's church. "So I told him we were in the midst of a sermon series about *The Da Vinci Code*, and he came with his girlfriend. They wanted to know how to become members," Curtis says. That was a unique situation, though. "The employees all know that I'm a pastor, and where I'm a pastor," says Curtis, "but that my goal isn't to bring people to my church."

Curtis is intentional about bringing her work in the restaurant back to the church. "I've used my work at the restaurant as a sermon illustration," she says. "I said that we as pastors encourage congregants to share their faith at work, and this is how I do it. I tell them that I don't shout Bible verses; I just live life with the kids. I see it as a way for me to reach out to a community that wouldn't normally have contact with the church. It's going where they are, instead of expecting them to come to where I am." ■

 outStanding in the field

# A PROMISE KEPT



by Heather Roote Faller

Darrell Armstrong ('99B) never intended to become director of the Division of Child Abuse Prevention and Community Partnerships for the New Jersey State Department. As the third pastor to serve Trenton's historic Shiloh Baptist Church in the last one hundred years, he was committed to parish ministry, and had agreed not to work an outside job. That's when the phone rang.

It was February 2006, and Human Services Commissioner Kevin Ryan asked Armstrong to take on rebuilding the state's child abuse prevention strategy. Armstrong first prayed, then spoke to his wife, who gave her support. Then he spoke to his congregation. Two hundred people voted on whether he could pursue the state job in addition to his church responsibilities, and ninety-eight percent voted yes. "I felt fully supported by God, family, and church," said Armstrong, "and then it became a personal mission."

The mission was personal because Armstrong knows what it's like to be a child in need. He was born to a fifteen-year-old mother and raised in South Central Los Angeles. When he was five, he and his eighteen-month-old brother were made wards of the State of California after their mother's boyfriend purposely scalded the younger child, causing third-degree burns. The brothers were separated, and over the next eighteen months Armstrong was sent to three different foster homes, until his maternal grandfather and step-grandmother took him in. Years later, during his third year at PTS, he learned that his mother had died of an overdose of heroin and crack cocaine. "After eulogizing my mother, I promised God, my mother, and myself that I would do more to strengthen families so that children would not experience what I did," he said.

And Armstrong kept his promise. After graduating from PTS, he founded the

National Association of Foster Children. Because of this advocacy, in 2003 Jim McGreevey, then Governor of New Jersey, appointed him to the Governor's Cabinet for Children, an interdepartmental instrument for child abuse prevention. In 2005, Governor Jon Corzine asked him to cochair his child welfare reform transition team.

Now as director of his division in the newly created Department of Children and Families, Armstrong is responsible for New Jersey's strategy for preventing child abuse and neglect, and for building the community-based infrastructure to implement it. The division is also new and is part of reforms to the state's child welfare system after the widely publicized 2003 death of seven-year-old Faheem Williams in Newark, New Jersey.

The heart of Armstrong's strategy is to support the whole family. "You can't get to prevention and protection until you deal with family strengthening," he said. To that end, Armstrong supervises thirty people and oversees two major programs. The New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect advises the state on child abuse prevention and child protection and gives grants to nonprofits to do abuse prevention. The School-Based Youth Services Program covers more than 200 sites where students can access individual and family counseling and job services. Armstrong is also building a staff who will work on issues of home visitation, parenting education, substance



Photo: Darrell Armstrong

Armstrong with his wife Melanie L. Pinkney, Esq. and their daughter.

abuse, domestic violence, and faith- and community-based organizing.

Armstrong sees child abuse prevention and family support as endemic not only to his own call to ministry, but to ministry in general. He cites God's injunction to care for the orphan, and Jesus' concern for children.

Although his commitment to children flows out of his commitment to Christ, Armstrong's mission as a state employee is "to do the work of God in as broad a context as I can." He has questioned whether he can work in government without compromising his prophetic pastoral voice, but found his answer in the Book of Daniel, which his church was studying when he was offered the state job. "We talked about what it means to be a witness in your work environment," he said. "Joseph, Nehemiah, and Esther served in the courts of pharaohs and kings in prominent positions, and there's a real lesson there, that you can serve in the public arena and still be true to your God. God puts people where he wants them to be for reasons and seasons. And you never know how long nor exactly what the reason is, other than to glorify God."

At this season in Armstrong's life, he feels he's where he should be. "I see this work as a divinely ordained opportunity," he said, "to work with Governor Corzine and Commissioner Ryan, because both men share my deep commitment to strengthening families and empowering children." When asked what he would tell today's seminarians about life in ministry, he said, "Never put God in a box. You never know where God will take you." ■

Photo: The College of New Jersey



Above left, the seal of the State of New Jersey; below: Darrell Armstrong