

Sports

"When he sets his mind to something he's going to see it through"
—Cardinal Newman Football Coach Paul Cronin

Fresh Hope

Cardinal newman senior class president raises money to build bakery for dominican republic orphanages



Courtland Palmer, a Cardinal Newman senior, raised nearly \$90,000 to build a bakery for Dominican Republic orphanages. The bakery helps to feed children at the orphanages, could possibly earn revenue through sales and also can teach older girls vital food-service skills. Palmer named the bakery Russ's Kitchen, after his late uncle Russ Villarini.

Photo: Christopher Chung / PD

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Cardinal Newman High School's Community Based Service Learning program sends a small army of 12th graders into the community each year to volunteer at hospitals, promote literacy in elementary schools and teach developmentally impaired youngsters to ice skate, among other worthy causes.

Courtland palmer in dominican republic sometimes the effects can be farther reaching.

In the heart of Santo Domingo, the teeming capital of the Dominican Republic, an orphanage called Altagracia has a brand-new bakery. It produces food for the children and teaches them valuable kitchen skills. The bakery is a testa-

ment to the imagination, spirit and dogged tenacity of Courtland Palmer, an All-Empire football player and senior class president at Cardinal Newman.

Rafaelina Brito, who runs Altagracia and another home for girls, Dona Chucha, still remembers the day she, Palmer and the boy's aunt, Julie Villarini, decided that a panaderia would be the perfect CBSL project for Palmer. The three of them sat down and sketched out a detailed construction budget, then converted it to U.S. dollars. It added up to \$85,000. Brito inhaled sharply. Palmer fixed her with a calm look and said, "We can do this."

"I know we can do it," Brito said by phone, recalling the conversation. "But to say it just very flat like this — 'we can do it' — so easy that way ... He was like an angel. It was like our prayers were answered at this moment."

To understand how the panaderia sprang to life, you have to know a little about Palmer's family.

Four years ago, he lost a maternal uncle, Russ Villarini, to pancreatic cancer at the age of 40. Palmer remembers a gregarious man, a General Motors engineer who was always quick with a joke or a spot-on impersonation of Courtland's stern Puerto Rican grandfather.

Julie Villarini, Russ' widow, was devastated by the loss of her husband. Instead of turning inward, though, she went looking for a way to serve, and through some friends was introduced to a pair of Catholic orphanages that provide sanctuary to just over 150 girls in Santa Domingo. Dona Chucha is for girls ages 6 to 12, Altagracia 13 to 18.

Technically, they are not true orphanages. Some of the girls were removed from abusive family situations. Many are simply destitute; they spend Monday through Friday at the homes, getting lodging, meals and instruction, and return to their families on weekends.

Julie eventually set up a 501(c)(3) nonprofit called Here For Them to help support the desperately underfunded homes. So when Palmer got the itch for a charitable project, he knew where to start. He flew to the Dominican in April of 2011 and was immediately introduced to a world that had previously been hidden from him.

"Rafaelina brings me to this neighborhood where the houses are pieces of tin and pieces of wood leaned up against each other," Palmer said. "And literally the room is a third of the size of my bedroom, and there's nine people living in it ... It's one of those things, you hear people talk about it, and you see documentaries about the poverty, but it's something you'll never be able to understand unless you're standing in that room and you're looking at a naked child, and how the 5-year-old daughter is responsible for the 2-year-old son."

And yet the children at Dona Chucha and Altagracia virtually burst with happiness. They danced and climbed on him and constantly styled his straight hair, a rarity on the island of Hispaniola. Palmer resolved to do something for the orphanages. He just wasn't sure what.

It was on the last of his six days in the Caribbean that he, Brito and Julie Villarini thought of the bakery. Palmer loved the idea for three reasons. It would help to feed the children of Dona Chucha and Altagracia, which had shortfalls of up to \$8,000 a month just in food costs. It could conceivably earn revenue for the orphanages through sales. And perhaps most important, it would teach the older girls vital food-service skills on an island dominated by a tourist economy.

Palmer would call the bakery Russ's Kitchen, to honor his uncle.

Then came the hard part: raising the money. Granted, Palmer has some obvious economic assets. His father is celebrity chef Charlie Palmer, and that connection would pay dividends for the orphans when Charlie hosted a charity pig roast at VML Winery that brought in \$40,000.

Other family members got into the act. Courtland's younger brother, Randall — a year behind him at Cardinal Newman — produced a slick 10½-minute video on Russ's Kitchen that you can watch on YouTube. Randall and a friend, Chris Coddling (both play football at Newman), are devising a certificate program for the girls who work in the bakery, figuring it will help them land jobs after they leave Altagracia.

Courtland Palmer, 18, plans to study business at either UC Berkeley or Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, and he tackled the economics of the bakery project as if it were a professional internship.

He secured a \$10,000 grant from Orange, a subsidiary of France Telecom, before he even left the island that first time, and he later got another \$10,000 from Met Life. Those big-ticket gifts took a lot of the pressure off, but Palmer still had \$25,000 to raise. He hit up family friends, classmates, practically anyone he could think of. His elevator speech is smooth as silk by now.

He not only met his goal, he exceeded it. Palmer has brought in close to \$90,000 by now, and the panaderia celebrated its



grand opening in February. Palmer flew back for the festivities. Palmer doesn't feel he can stop raising money for Russ's Kitchen yet. The exchange rate between the U.S. dollar and the Dominican peso has shifted in a year, making the project a bit more expensive than planned. And of course there have been unexpected costs. Staff installed a new \$14,000 generator at one point, and it blew out Altagracia's wiring.

But the bakery is a functioning reality. The orphans get fresh bread in the morning and with dinner, and they get cupcakes at lunch.

Palmer's accomplishments do not surprise Cardinal Newman football coach Paul Cronin. He knows Palmer as an undersized, 5-foot-11 defensive end who earned 2011 North Bay League Lineman of the Year honors on sheer tenacity. In football, the defensive signals are usually called by an inside linebacker, or perhaps a safety; those players have the best view of the offensive formation. Palmer, a born leader, made the Cardinals' calls at defensive end.

"His junior year he got injured," Cronin said. "He was playing nose guard and he blew out his ACL in the second game against Valley Christian. He was determined to get back. He had surgery, and he rehabbed, and he played in the section final game that year. Then he blew it out again in the final -- and he played through it. When he sets his mind to something, he's going to see it through."

And maybe stay with it forever. Palmer insists he will return to the Dominican Republic, and to the orphanages of Dona Chucha and Altagracia, every year for the rest of his life. "With football, the thing is, it's not something you can choose to do for the rest of your life," Palmer said. "You have to be at a certain point. If I was three inches taller I'd be able to play (Division I college football). But I'm not. So if this is something that I love to do, just like football, then why would I stop?"