

Edmonton school chaplain still connects to kids as he struggles with cancer

By Andrea Sands, Edmonton Journal June 2, 2013

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Father Mike Mireau with his dog Nemo in his office in St. Francis Xavier High School on Thursday, May 30, 2013. Father Mireau is battling a rare form of cancer.

Photograph by: John Lucas , Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - Students' messages of encouragement on yellow, pink and blue Post-it notes cling to Father Mike Mireau's door at St. Francis Xavier High School.

Never give up hope. Choose to see the good stuff. Don't overthink, just let go.

Mireau, district chaplain for Edmonton Catholic Schools, is inside his small office, reclining on a sofa and chaise longue next to his eight-year-old long-haired dachshund, Nemo.

Mireau, 41, gets tired quickly these days. He is on a mix of medications to ease pain and nausea from a rare and aggressive tumour growing in his abdomen after being diagnosed in February with a desmoplastic small round cell tumour.

The cancer almost always appears in men, usually young men or teens, and the survival rate is poor.

Chemotherapy failed and Mireau's tumour is now the size of a volleyball, squeezing his organs and making it difficult to breathe. He wakes up with debilitating pain each morning until the medications kick in.

Mireau was considering an experimental drug treatment at the Cross Cancer Institute, but is now pursuing surgery and radiation therapy at Calgary's Foothills Medical Centre. He hopes to schedule surgery this summer.

"I feel at peace. I feel that either God will cure me or God will call me home, and I'm OK with either of those two alternatives," Mireau says.

"As a priest, I've dealt with death throughout my life. There was the death of my best friend at 18, the many funerals I've performed, some for very young people. I don't find myself shocked when these things happen to me. It's more like, why shouldn't it happen to me? It happens to all these other people."

Mireau tries to continue his work with young people most days. He took his current job in 2010, the first time an ordained priest has filled the role.

Mireau works mainly in St. Francis Xavier, at 9250 163rd St., but travels to Catholic schools throughout the district.

Yawning, Mireau looks pale and says he needs a morning nap. But he becomes more animated when asked about his renowned ability to connect kids to Catholicism with modern messages.

Father "Catfish" — nicknamed after catfish cartoons he and a buddy often drew as teenagers — is a formidable presence online, with a blog, Facebook page, Twitter and YouTube accounts, and a website. He covers all kinds of topics from a Catholic perspective, including What's Wrong With Porn, Is Premarital Sex Really a Sin, and Why do Evangelical Churches Have Cooler Music and Programs Than Catholics Do?

His website is peppered with pop-culture parallels — Jesus Christ reimagined as Superman, Star Wars infused with the Holy Spirit.

“Superman is unique and isolated. He fell out of the sky and is both one of us and yet not one of us because he’s special. He’s saving people all the time, providing divine intervention, if you will, solving problems no one else can solve. Typically, a lot of stories seem to depict him in some act of self sacrifice. It’s a common thread through many Superman stories,” Mireau says.

“In Star Wars, the Force is their galactic religion, essentially. Its light side and its dark side, it depicts a battle between good and evil, and shows the difference between those who submit to the Force and those who use it to control.”

Mireau recalls seeing Star Wars as a young boy and being enthralled. Now, he draws on the lessons in Star Wars, weaving them into his homilies and sermons, connecting them with God and daily life.

“My hope is to still be around when that next Star Wars: Episode VII comes out. I think it’s currently scheduled for 2015. That would be a nice bonus.”

He uses video blogs to chart his journey with cancer. In a March 3 video “rant,” titled Goobye, Hair, Mireau tells his audience he is about to start chemotherapy and lose the long, brown hair he’s had for 20 years.

“As a priest, I feel it’s my job to take all of my experiences, particularly experiences of faith, and to live them out publicly, so others can relate to my life and the ways God appears in my life, and connect it to the way God appears in their lives,” he says.

“I get a lot of support and a lot of people who tell me that they’re praying for me.”

The religion department head at St. Francis Xavier has known Mireau for about 15 years, since he was training in Edmonton’s Newman Theological College.

“I think he’s brought a real education to the students and to the staff. He has the ability to explain things, the big issues — whether it’s parents’ divorce, somebody dying, bullying — that it just makes sense, but he doesn’t let anybody off the hook,” Eugenia Chisotti says.

“So if you are bullying, he’ll call you on it, but very compassionately. He’s also really, really open about his own struggles growing up, being picked on, so a lot of the kids really get that.”

Mireau’s diagnosis was devastating for staff and students at the school, who have turned to their faith for comfort.

“He’s been really open about being scared,” she says.

“For him to be here and share this with us ... it’s a real educational experience for the kids, and I hope it gets them to think about how we value life. Every person is so important, and let’s take the time to talk about it.”

Mireau continues to focus on the students he serves despite his serious health struggles, Catholic school board chair Becky Kallal says.

“He’s even using his illness to reach out to the kids and talk with them on a deeply personal level,” she says.

People across the school district are praying for Mireau, “lifting Father Mike up at the same time he is lifing our district up,” Kallal says.

“It’s just beautiful to see.”