



Planting seeds of hope

SHARON GEKOSKI-KIMMEL / Staff Photographer

The Rev. Adan Mairena, pastor at West Kensington Ministry, leads a Sunday service. He moved from Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, he said, because the area called him. "He helps feed hungry families, and does it in a way that leaves them their honor," an admirer says.

By Alfred Lubrano
Inquirer Staff Writer

Stepping past the hooded hustlers slinging drugs in West Kensington, members of a small Bible-study group gathered one night in a faded Presbyterian church on Norris Square.

Seated across from a giant painting of a Latino Jesus were a young woman whose house is caving in, a mother and three children on the run from a violent husband and father, and a bona fide former pop star with the scars from seven knife wounds to his neck from a recent street attack.

Hurting but hopeful, they leaned in to hear their pastor, the Rev. Adan Mairena, who transferred from calm and moneyed Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church to the West Kensington Ministry because, he said, the place called him.

"Ever been to a church where the preacher says he saves people?" asked Mairena, 37, born in Honduras and raised in Chicago by parents who both were Presbyterian ministers. "It makes you say to yourself, 'Oh, you're too good for me, Reverend.'"

"Well, Jesus wasn't like that. He was down with the homies and could hang out with the suits, too. I'm talking about a way of life instead of just a bunch of beliefs. You love your neighbor, you feed the poor.

"You follow me?"

They do.

In West Kensington, part of the First Congressional District - the second-hungriest in America - following Adan Mairena is considered one of the smarter things to do.

Convicts and bankers, dropouts and cookie magnates orbit Mairena, at 5-foot-9 and 200 pounds a solidly built, dark-haired dynamo with a rumpled streetwise manner and an easy smile.

People see grace and light in Mairena. They revel in his quiet charisma, which charms in English and Spanish.

"He's a very spiritual man," said Rich Merriman, chief executive of Pennsylvania Trust in Radnor, where he says that no account is less than \$1 million. Mairena was Merriman's minister in Bryn Mawr, and the two lunch regularly. "He cares about the poor like Jesus did the lepers and outcasts. He's the real deal. He lives his faith."

Miguel Rosario agreed. "Adan's amazing, man," said Rosario, a congregant who was locked up five months for a bar fight, and who later found work as an electrician with Mairena's help. "He finds good in anything bad. Most Latinos grow up Catholic, but I go to a Presbyterian church now just for him."

Community leaders praise Mairena for taking kids who normally never leave the neighborhood to ball games, museums, and City Hall. He keeps young people occupied with a church recording studio, a video-editing lab where he produces a youth talk show for public-access cable TV, and a ceramics studio. Much of the money comes from donations from sister Presbyterian churches and the Presbytery of Philadelphia - although there's never enough, Mairena said.

"The kids love him - *love* him," said State Sen. Christine Tartaglione (D., Phila.). "He walks lightly but gets the greatest results. He pays people's electric bills, he helps feed hungry families, and does it in a way that leaves them their honor."

Resistant to working for the large Latino community organizations that pepper the district, Mairena prefers to steer his own ship - getting jobs for congregants, hosting open-mike nights for kids, playing his Bryn Mawr-donated Fender Stratocaster guitar in a surprisingly skilled church band that features vocalist James Cartagena, whose old group Voices of Theory recorded albums and once opened for Mariah Carey. It all fell apart after the band's manager was murdered - another victim of the often-violent life in the First Congressional District.

The recent knife attack on Cartagena is just more agony.

Ask Mairena why he's in Kensington, and he'll tell you it's not like he had a choice.

"The place chooses you," he said. "The place calls you. The electricity of the neighborhood, that urban feel. The sounds, the diversity, and the people who look like me."

Back in June 2008, he switched from the leafiest of suburbs to one of the poorest spots in North America.

"In one day, I went from the first world to the third - in 15 miles," Mairena said. "From Renoirs on the walls to people with no running water."

Of his 40 or so mostly Puerto Rican congregants - or "motley crew of misfits," as Mairena lovingly calls them - many of the women are single mothers, while "99 percent of the men have been to jail," he said.

Mairena, who often dresses casually in button-down shirts and shorts or jeans, has dropped off his business cards in local prisons, soliciting potential congregants. It worked. A few men who currently worship with Mairena - Rosario among them - bought his cards from other inmates with cigarettes or socks. Just knowing his name would be a lifeline for them after they were released and looking for work.

"A Bryn Mawr woman asked me once, 'What do they want in Kensington?' " Mairena recalled. "I said, 'The same as you - a decent life.' "

That makes Mairena's wife, Reyna, 38, smile. "It was easy to be in a comfort zone like Bryn Mawr," said Reyna, a legal secretary in Center City. "But Adan said, 'I want to be where I'm needed.' So this is the place to be."

The couple is determined to start a family, she said, adding: "But Adan has so much to do."

An unlikely mentor

At an upscale pizza place in Queen Village one afternoon, Mairena ate lunch with his friend David Auspitz. Auspitz was buying.

The former controversial chairman of the Zoning Board of Adjustment and current owner of Famous Fourth Street Cookies, the voluble Auspitz, 65, is an unlikely mentor for the young cleric.

Yet the two are buddies, drawn together by a wariness of big corporate entities and a shared preference for helping willing workers get jobs.

"We believe in people, in the workforce in Adan's neighborhood," said Auspitz, known for his blustery style. "They have a 1950s mentality of wanting to work, own a house, live a middle-class life."

"They don't need special programs up there. They need businesses like shoe stores and someone Spanish from the neighborhood to sell the shoes."

Mairena smiled when Auspitz talked. "What I like about David," Mairena said, "is that he understands a human being gets a sense of self-worth by working at a job."

The men met in the neighborhood while Auspitz was inspecting a piece of property he'd bought on American Street and Mairena was walking Shadow, his 3-year-old pit bull rescued from Norris Square Park.

Auspitz has been trying to get a Kennett Square company to construct a building on his property in which they would grow mushrooms. Mairena would supply the labor. So far, the project remains just an idea.

To find a little work for congregants in the meantime, Mairena asked Auspitz to hire his people to clean up Auspitz's property.

"I asked how the job came out," said Mairena.

"And I said it sucked," Auspitz responded tartly.

"I like that honesty," said Mairena with a laugh. He directed the workers to try again.

Undeterred, Mairena recommended that Auspitz hire another congregant - Cartagena - as a driver for his company.

"I hire by the smile," Auspitz said, "not the resume."

Currently, Auspitz is advising Mairena on how to get Kensington residents, or *Kensos*, hired at a Pathmark supermarket being built at the Piazza at Schmidts, south of Kensington in Northern Liberties.

"Through David, I met the guys running the project," Mairena said.

"I have entree to a lot of people, and I try to help," Auspitz said.

"This is stuff they don't teach at seminary," Mairena said. "How to ask a question in the corporate world and get stuff done. There's a lot of wisdom I get from David."

Auspitz said he admires Mairena's manner. "He's like me, no B.S.," Auspitz said. "And, I figure, how bad could a church guy be?"

"Oh," Mairena answered, laughing, "sometimes we're worse than you think."

'Our Lone Ranger'

Mairena's band was practicing one night in the church, the high-decibel onslaught scattering ghosts of Presbyterians past who may still haunt the creaky old place.

The guys call themselves Mark 17 - The Lost Chapter. It's a Bible joke. "There's no Mark 17 in the Bible," Mairena said. "We consider ourselves to be the message."

Shadow quietly weaved her way among the amplifiers and band members, including keyboardist Victor Negron, the director of marketing and public affairs at Keystone Mercy Health Plan.

"What can I say?" Negron said. "The rev is the ultimate chef of our melting pot. He's our Lone Ranger."

The guys blasted through some high-energy Christian rock for a forthcoming church concert.

"Adan makes us passionate about the neighborhood," said Cartagena, half-hidden in a hooded Polo sweatshirt, still breathless from the set. "He shows us there's life beyond the guns and violence."

While he's waiting for his music career to relaunch, Cartagena is going to trucking school - \$2,500 of whose tuition was paid by Mairena.

"He helped me, and he didn't know me from a can of paint," said Cartagena. "I'll repay him by building up this church."

That pleases Mairena. But, he explains, helping Cartagena or anyone else in the swirl of chaos that sometimes characterizes life in the district is in the job description.

"I want people to see themselves as beloved children of God," Mairena said. "The mission of this church is to be relevant, to really be on the ground, to meet people where they are. That's what Jesus did.

"I just try to plant the seeds of hope out here."

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