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# THE CATHOLIC COMMENTATOR

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## [Blind musician finds the color of life through his love of Jesus](#)

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By **Debbie Shelley**

The Catholic Commentator

“ ‘Please show me what colors look like,’ I told Jesus. I’m curious and fascinated with what that might look like,” said Neil Blanchard, his voice brimming with inquisitiveness about what it would be like to see.



*Neil Blanchard plays the guitar for the living Stations of the Cross at St. Elizabeth School on April 7. Photo by Debbie Shelley | The Catholic Commentator*

Blind from birth because of too much oxygen in his incubator as a newborn, Blanchard said Jesus, whom he affectionately calls “Chief,” reassures him that what he will see in heaven will surpass his wildest dreams. For now, he uses the eyes of his soul – his sorrows, frustrations, whimsical moments, joys and surrender to his friend (Christ) rolling out with melodic beauty as

he strums his guitar in liturgical and social gatherings.

Sister Dorothy LeBlanc presented Blanchard with his first guitar in 1979.

“I could smell the newness of it,” said Blanchard. “Sister said, ‘I don’t know how to play it, but if you promise me you are going to serve the Lord, I’m going to give it to you.’ I said, ‘I don’t know how it’s going to work, but I’m going to do it,’ ” said Blanchard.

The guitar case became dilapidated, and St. Elizabeth Church and School in Paincourtville, where he has played for Friday school Masses for the past 38 years, bought him a new one. But the guitar has held up nicely.

To help Blanchard become as self-sufficient as possible, his parents enrolled him in the Louisiana School for the Blind in Baton Rouge in 1958, when it was on Government Street and located about three blocks from St. Agnes Church.

“My parents didn’t (like) leaving me, but they knew they had to do it,” Blanchard said.

Attending the school until he graduated in 1974 was a trying time for Blanchard, but he made good friends.

His love of music also developed through the years. Playing the guitar brought him many hours of joy with his musically-inclined family and friends.

Blanchard played the guitar for people as often as he could. When he was young, he was part of a band of family and friends called “Combination Five.” They played in the Battle of the Bands in Pierre Part, where they took second place playing such songs as “In A Gadda Davida” by Iron Butterfly.

“Man we extended that as long as it would go. We loved it,” said Blanchard.

They also played songs such as “Venus” by Shocking Blue.

Blanchard’s family was one of the biggest fans at the various venues they played.

“Our mothers would pass around the collection basket. We thought it was a big thing if we made \$22 a night,” Blanchard mused.

He and his cousin Morgan Blanchard also formed the musical duo, “BJ and the Bear” (inspired by the television series).

“I was the bear of course,” Blanchard quipped.

A self-proclaimed “Christian ladies man,” Blanchard wrote songs dedicated to women who have a special place in his heart. One of the songs is “Julie,” which is dedicated to a woman who now lives in St. Louis. The song starts off with sad, minor chords as he “cries her out of his system” after she goes away. “Happy notes” then trickle in and skip along as she comes back into his life, only to return to the minor chords as she is gone again.

“It ends on a happy note because she said, ‘Neil be patient, we will see each other again in time,’ ” said Blanchard.

True to his promise to Sister Dorothy, Blanchard answered God’s call, extended through Father Tom Ranzino, then pastor of St. Joseph the Worker in Pierre Part, to use his talent to serve God. He particularly enjoys playing the Divine Mercy Chaplet after Tuesday Masses and during Lent at St. Joseph. He has also played at weddings and funerals and other occasions.

Through braille resources provided by the St. Francis Xavier Society for the Blind, Blanchard lectures at St. Joseph.

“Neil comes from a very gifted and blessed family, all, or most of all, whom are singers,” said Father Al Davidson, pastor of St. Joseph. “He is doing his best to bring people in (to the faith).”

Father Davidson noted that Blanchard provided a moment of spiritual enlightenment when the church completed its renovations in 2014. The crucifix was taken down during the renovations, and before it was remounted, Father Davidson asked Blanchard if he would like to touch it. He said the expression on Blanchard’s face as he did so deeply touched those who witnessed it.

“For everyone who saw it, it opened our eyes in a very special way that we were blind to before,” said Father Davidson.

Playing for the Friday Masses, and particularly playing for the living Stations of the Cross at St. Elizabeth is something Blanchard looks forward to.

“That (the stations) is a beautiful thing for me,” said Blanchard.

Other important musical “bookings” include playing for residents in the nursing home and patients at the Mary Bird Perkins Cancer Center in Baton Rouge, where his sister, Marlene, who died about three years ago, was treated for multiple myeloma.

Blanchard said music has brought “many people into his life” and he has high aspirations of what he would like to do with it, including playing on EWTN.

Even though he does not have physical eyesight, Blanchard said there are many things he can picture in his “minds eye.”

When at a Fourth of July fireworks display he pictures how beautiful the colors of the fireworks must be, or whether they are a “dud,” by the sound of the “booms” and the “oohs and aaahs” coming from the crowd. An avid LSU fan, the play-by-play announcements and roar, or quietness, of the crowd tells him how the game is going.

He also pictures things in the spiritual realm as well.

“Mary is super cool. I know what her voice is like,” said Blanchard. “I’ll ask her, ‘Mamma, are you short or tall? What does your hair feel like?’ ”

He also pictures what it will be like to meet Jesus.

“I picture myself putting my hands in his side and touching his ribs,” said Blanchard.

Other things he would like to see are more Catholics coming home to the faith.

“Jesus founded this religion, it’s more reason to be aware of this and honor him through this,” Blanchard said.

As he waits the glory of heaven to come, he does all he can to express his devotion to Jesus, particularly through his music. He played a sample of “This One Goes out to the One I Love,” by R.E.M. The name of the beloved he inserts into the song, however, is Jesus.

“I hope he likes it,” Blanchard humbly said. “I try to show him I love him.”