

Never give up

One of the opportunities, I have in retirement is to celebrate Mass at one of the nursing homes in the local town. They residents look forward to attending Mass on the First Friday of every month. Usually, I arrive early so I can have a chance to visit with some of the residents prior to the Mass. Some are permanent residents. Some are there for physical therapy following surgery in the local hospital. Volunteers from the local St. Vincent DePaul arrive early to take the residents from their rooms to the chapel for Mass.

I chatted with one particular lady before Mass. It was the first time I had seen her and found out that she was there for physical therapy. When she heard me ask her where she was from and how long she was there, she replied, "You sound like a Yank." I played along with her for a while and eventually told her that I had spent some time in the States. Obviously, someone who had spent time in Mississippi would chuckle at being called a "Yank." Maybe, more appropriately, they might be called a "Southerner." The gospel reading that particular Friday was the story of Jesus going home to Nazareth where he had been raised and how he could not perform any miracles there because the people knew him as a kid as well as his parents and extended family. He felt rejected by his own folks.

Following Mass, a gentleman in his late sixties approached me. His rounded features and black glasses stood on a well-fortified stocky body. Jack introduced himself and began to tell me his story.

"That gospel today at Mass really spoke to me. I was that person in real life. That same thing happened to me when I was growing up."

"We were a big family – eight of us, along with my parents. We lived in a certain area of this town and were surrounded by middle class people. But, we were anything but middle class. We were so poor that the local St. Vincent DePaul helped put food on our table every week. Back in the forties, my father was a chef but he had a problem with the drink. He would spend any money he earned on drink. This was his curse.

As kids, we had to leave school early and go out to work. I began working in the local factory when I was thirteen. I couldn't read or write. Kids in our neighbourhood made fun of me. They called me names, like being 'stupid.' The families in our neighbourhood ostracized us.

I remember meeting a De La Salle brother called 'Brother Andrew,' He encouraged me to never give up but to work tirelessly as trying to learn to read. That Brother gave me hope and determination.

I loved the movies as a kid. I would try and listen to what the actors were saying and that encouraged me to keep trying to learn how to read. One movie that I will never forget seeing as a twelve year old kid was one with actor Jimmy Stewart. It was the movie, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." I said to myself that if Mr. Smith could do it, then I can do it as well."

And so began Jack's journey to banish illiteracy from his mind. He went on to tell me about the hundreds of books he had read over the decades since. He even said that he had read the whole Bible as well as the Koran.

"When I die and go up there, I hope to meet my father and tell him that I love him and understand and that he should be proud of how his son turned out in life."

The conversation ended all too soon and as we were about to part, he said, "That's my story and I made a promise to Brother Andrew that anyone I would tell my story to, I would always mention his name. Jack ended our conversation with a question, "Can I give you a hug? We embraced and parted and I left a much richer and blessed person.

My encounter with Jack reminded me to think of the many teachers who passed through my own life. Some were mean, cruel and never should be allowed to teach anyone. Others were motivators, inspirers, encouragers, and challengers.

Maybe, Jack has reminded me to take stock and appreciate the teachers who made a difference in all our lives. Jack's determination, perseverance and doggedness reminds me of one of the shortest graduation addresses given by a famous person. The address was given by Sir. Winston Churchill and his five simple words still engenders hope in the Jacks of our world. Churchill's words were: "Never! Never! Never! Give up."