

INSIGHT

Franciscan student group focuses on spiritual growth. Today it is mourning the loss of one of its own.

Prodigal Sons celebrate a life

By Ann Rodgers-Melnick
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

STEUBENVILLE — As word reached them in Florida, Connecticut and Ontario, Canada, that their brother Aaron Land had been abducted and was missing, the Prodigal Sons returned home to the Franciscan University of Steubenville.

Prodigal Sons is the "household" or spiritual fraternity to which Land had belonged since he entered Franciscan in 1997 as a



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Students huddle before a memorial service at Franciscan University Friday.

freshman in marketing. School was out for the summer, and the Prodigal Sons had scattered across the continent. But after the abduction of Land and another student on May 31, 14 Prodigal Sons and Prodigal Son alumni returned to campus. Together they prayed that Land, 20, and his friend, Brian Muha, 18, would be found alive. They supported each other, prayed for the victims'

families and tried to assist searchers.

When word came Friday that the students' bodies were found side-by-side in the woods of southwestern Pennsylvania, they drew together to celebrate the life of their friend.

"We are living with the memories of all the good things he did," said Ivan Ortiz, 24,

SEE **PRODIGAL**, PAGE A-22

Prodigal Sons group shares a faith

PRODIGAL FROM PAGE A-1

who graduated in 1998 but returned to campus this week from Lorain, Ohio, where he lives with two other alumni of the Prodigal Sons and teaches at a Catholic school.

For five days while the police offered no hope, the devoutly Catholic families and friends of the students had restrained their tears to pray sincerely for a miracle: Maybe the students had survived the gunshots that three suspects accused each other of pumping into them. Maybe the perpetrators were so drugged up that they hallucinated the brutal act. The campus was filled with tension between hope and grief.

But "now that I know the facts, now that we have found out for sure where they are, it brings a sense of peace," Ortiz said.

"This is a tragic loss for us, but I believe it is a glorious gain for Aaron and Brian. They are in the presence of the Lord."

Such faith is what the university's households were designed to cultivate. While classes help them grow in their intellectual grasp of Catholicism, households help them grow spiritually. More than 650 of the 2,000 students belong to the voluntary groups, which number more than 40. Many households, including the Prodigal Sons, share a dormitory wing. Older household members sometimes share an apartment off campus, as four Prodigal Sons did last year.

Both Land and Muha belonged to households, though not the same one. They were abducted from an off-campus apartment where they were staying with a friend for a few days while waiting to move into their own apartment for summer school. Their captors later marched them into the woods

off Route 22 and executed them.

Ortiz heard of the abduction Monday night from a friend who had been in Steubenville over Memorial Day weekend. A handsome, athletic man with large brown eyes, Ortiz cried himself to sleep on Tuesday. He rushed to Steubenville on Thursday.

"This kid is like a little brother to me. I had to come to help. I would do anything for him," Ortiz said, hours before the bodies were found.

"If he is alive and needs us, I don't want to be sitting in Cleveland."

Land was not the archetypal Prodigal Son.

Each household on the Steubenville campus has a different personality. Typical household names are the Servants of Christ's Love and the Little Flowers. But the Prodigal Sons was founded in 1988 by a group of freshly converted party animals who wanted to straighten up and fly right. They feared they would be out of place among households of lifelong devotees whose worst sins might have been cussing at a sibling or skipping Sunday Mass.

"They knew their lives were a bit rambunctious, but they were Christians, with a love for Christ, who set out on a path to come back," Ortiz said.

They took their name from Jesus' story about a young man who left home and squandered his wealth on wild living before humbly returning home to his loving father. The household "reflects the image of the prodigal son coming home to the father, not the image of him running away," said Chris Ledyard, the campus athletic director and the adviser to the Prodigal Sons.

But not every one of Steubenville's Prodigal Sons had a background of wild living. Their most common bond was an outgoing, fun-loving personality. It's just that some of them struggled to shift

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① their social life from a bad crowd to a good one, Ortiz said.

Land shared their happy-go-lucky personality, but his past was clean, Ledyard said.

While in high school in Colorado, Land was traumatized by his father's death. He credited Mike Manhardt, a youth minister and Franciscan graduate, with stepping into his life as a mentor and lifting him from the depths of depression. Still another youth minister and Franciscan graduate was so impressed with Land that he had named his first son after the teen, Ledyard said.

Manhardt brought Land to campus several times when he was still in high school, introducing him to the Prodigal Sons. Even at 16, Land enjoyed the easy laughter and light-hearted rough-housing of "the Prods" as they are known. Voting him in as a freshman was the easiest decision the Prods ever made, Ortiz said. Land had a strength of character that even the eldest students and administrators respected from the first.

Land's mother, who has two other teenage children and now lives in Philadelphia, was unable to help him financially. He earned a full scholarship for his freshman year, but then had to pay his own way. Last August it looked as if he would have to drop out, said Bob Hickey, the director of admissions.

But Land was convinced that God would provide. He told Hickey that he had prayed hard over his decision to attend Franciscan and was certain that God wanted him there.

Although matters had reached the point where Hickey ought to have insisted on payment, he found himself responding, "That is good enough for

② me." And, at the last moment, unexpected financial aid came through. With loans and money he earned from jobs, "on a wing and a prayer, he made it," Hickey said.

In October of Land's freshman year, all of the households competed on an obstacle course that requires teamwork and problem solving. The Prods arrived cocky and confident in their athletic prowess.

On the very first event they were failing miserably. They needed to march in line, in unison, with their feet planted on side-by-side balance beams. As one student and then another fell off, the other Prods would break up into laughter. With time running out, their leader was frustrated, but the Prods acted too cool to care.

It was Land, the youngest student, who put them back on course, Ledyard recalled. Their failure, he recalled Land saying gently, "is typical of the way we relate to each other. We're not trying to get anywhere. If we continue this process for the rest of the day, the day will be a loss." At that moment, Ortiz recalled, all of the students realized that the obstacle course symbolized their spiritual lives. "We realized that we are just screwing up again. He was the young pup and he was teaching the big dogs. He had a real humility about it, but he was more mature than we were," Ortiz said. The Prods set records on the rest of the course.

Ortiz' own life fit the Prodigal Son stereotype. He grew up in Miami, Fla., where "I was not your model Catholic," he said. He went to Mass because he had to, but believed that religion was for "ninnies." He was annoyed when his older brother went to Franciscan, found God and changed. When his parents insisted

that he also go to Steubenville, Ortiz swore he would never do anything that his older brother had done, including join the Prodigal Sons.

But after a year on campus "something drew me back, and I stayed here five years. The spirituality and the community here is so nurturing," he said.

Ortiz finally joined the Prods because he didn't believe the members of other households could relate to his checkered past.

It has changed my life entirely. With so many guys who have a conversion, the seed is sown but there is no one there to help it grow. We help each other to grow. Each and every one of us has brought something to the group, and it has brought each of us to our own deeper conversion," he said.

"Like other households, the Prodigal Sons have done community service projects, such as repairing people's houses. But the heart of household life is the Lord's Day, a late Saturday afternoon ritual to welcome in the Sunday sabbath. They gather to share a loaf of bread, to talk about what has happened that week and to encourage each other in faith. They may pray together or share Bible passages that inspired them that week.

Each household chooses its own adviser, someone they see as more spiritually mature than they are, but who can empathize with their problems. Ledyard, who is married with a fourth child on the way, is a 1988 Steubenville graduate who had played in a Catholic rock band and served as vice president of a Christian high school before returning to Steubenville as athletic director. The spiritual standards of the household are those of the Catholic church, Ledyard said. Premarital sex and al-

③cohol abuse are out, the rosary and concern for the poor are in. A Prodigal may sometimes fall back on bad habits, but the household brothers watch out for each other.

"My concern is that we all be straightforward and honest about where we are at," Ledyard said.

"If a brother has a need, you don't bring it up to the whole group, but you seek someone out to say, 'I'm hurting, I need help,'" Ortiz said.

"We've all had our fair share of girlfriend problems. Some of the guys have a background with alcohol abuse or drug use. Now they are breaking out of their shell. They'll say, 'I want to kick this stuff. Can you give me a hand?'"

The Prods use humor rather than preaching to correct and support each other.

"The one thing I have learned the most is how to reach out in love, rather than criticizing and condemning," Ortiz said.

"It comes down to simple humility. We have all done bad things. Humans in general are like that. I've done things that are seriously wrong, that I don't want the guys to know about. But the great thing about being Catholic is that you can go to confession."

Land was one of the best listeners in the household. Ortiz had some personal problems his senior year that left him deeply discouraged. One night he happened to attend the same party as Land, and ended up pouring his heart out to him.

"He told me that [the problems] will end, that it will fade away. He was supportive. He was Aaron. I was 23 and here was this little 18-year-old kid telling me exactly what was up," Ortiz said.

"Even in death, 'Aaron is still helping us to grow,'" Ledyard said.

④ As the Prods gathered each night last week for prayer and consolation, Ledyard urged them to realize the importance living their lives fully for Christ. They have all been confronted with the reality of death and eternal life.

They went as a group to the search site. Although they were not permitted into the woods, they felt useful when they told their searchers how much they loved their missing brother.

For the search and rescue teams, "it puts a person on a name," Ortiz said.

Land's mother had been so emotionally fragile that Ortiz did not try to speak with her until their deaths were confirmed. But the Prodigal

Sons were profoundly affected by a brief talk that Muha's mother had given the night before in the campus chapel, in which she forgave the men who took her son from her.

"That has helped me," Ortiz said. "Right now it is very easy to hate and to condemn all of society. She has helped me with my reaction. 'What would Jesus do?' is a real catch phrase today. But what she did is what he would have done."

Ortiz was in the student center late Friday afternoon when he saw the news broadcast with official confirmation of his friend's death. At the last minute all of the Prodigal Sons had joined 750 men from across the nation who were attending a weekend retreat on campus to

⑥ deepen their commitment to Christ. That was a decision brought on by the unfolding tragedy.

In order to bring life and hope out of death and despair, "I have to take Aaron as an example. Aaron's death cannot be in vain," Ortiz said.

A few hours after the body was discovered, students, faculty and friends of the university overflowed the 400 seat chapel for a Holy Hour service. The Prodigal Sons sat together, close to the families, who they lingered to comfort after the service. "We are the Prodigal Sons," Ortiz said as he left the chapel. "We have to walk on the path back home. That is something that we must do continually. We never make it until we die. It is not an easy path, but the Lord is by our side."