

Raquel Rojas: Deaconess in the City

By Beth Foreman, Features Editor

Raquel A. Rojas is a single, twenty-six-year-old living in New York City. She loves Frank Sinatra and Marc Anthony. And if this were a Hollywood big-screen script, she'd be itching for a night on the town with her best girlfriends, stepping out in a pair of Jimmy Choo heels.

Instead, she chooses to spend most of her evenings and weekends visiting the elderly, counseling couples, leading a "Stretch and Reach" Zumba™ class, or hanging out with the youth at Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Bronx where she serves as Deaconess. She is forever learning, and sometimes she prefers *Lutheran Service Book* hymns like "Be Still My Soul" and "We Praise You and Acknowledge You" to salsa.

Talking to me via Skype from what she calls her cozy home, a one-bedroom second-floor apartment in the Bronx, Raquel shares her "in the City" life and ministry.

Almost every single day for the past two years, Raquel has dressed in her navy blue dress or blazer



"uniform" with the deaconess cross insignia that identifies her as God's servant.

"Pastor wears a collar every day, and I wear my uniform every day. It's important, especially in the urban context," she said. "My uniform lets people know who I am and Whose I am; and with that, they are comfortable talking with me."

She and Pastor Dien A. Taylor make it a point to walk to the different bodegas in the neighborhood so others know who they are. Doors open for conversations. "One day I was picking up juice for confirmation class, and a woman stopped me to share her troubles." Although initially surprised, Raquel listened to her story and then "prayed with her in the laundry soap aisle!"

Raquel's path into full-time church work completes a family circle. Her father, Rev. Roberto E. Rojas, is a Hispanic missionary pastor from Chile whose work is to plant Hispanic churches in the

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United States. Her mother, Deaconess Irma Rojas, is a deaconess who was born in Puerto Rico and moved to the Bronx when she was just thirteen. So when Raquel talks to her mother on Skype about her day, mom can relate. She knows the life her daughter is living. “Mami is a rock for me and I love her dearly. I’m so blessed to have a mother who models servanthood for me and encourages me in my service to others.”

Raquel’s close-knit family includes her two siblings, an older sister, Rebecca, who lives in Manhattan and works as an optometrist, and a younger brother, Robbie, who is serving his vicarage in Indiana. Growing up, they moved from Ohio to Nebraska and then to Orlando, Florida, which is where her parents have settled.

“Being brought up in a church-working family, I saw all the ins and outs, the pretty and the ugly.” Raquel remembers Deaconess Kristin Wasilak, who mentored Raquel’s mother in Nebraska, visiting at her home. “I was about thirteen, and I thought, ‘Hmm, Deaconess ... that’s pretty cool! I was very proud of Mami.’”

But Raquel also recalls the challenges. “I learned that her work didn’t end when she left the office. It’s a 24/7 job, and that’s one of the things I didn’t want. But God thought differently!”

During undergraduate studies at the University of Central Florida, like many 21st Century college students, Raquel struggled to find her direction. “I finally chose commerce and humanities, with a psych minor,” but she began considering the deaconess path.

Interestingly, Raquel’s mother was actually the one voice always giving her the “out.” When everyone else was saying, “Oh, you should be a deaconess like your mom,” her mother reminded her that she could serve God in many other ways. “I appreciated her honesty.”

After graduation, still drawn to the idea of becoming a deaconess, Raquel visited Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne and made her decision to begin studies.

Raquel was enriched by everything during her first year. “I came from a Hispanic missionary background where we had tambourines, maracas, and bongos, not pipe organs. So that was an eye-opener,” she said.

Studying theology and learning about herself, Raquel still wasn’t sure where she fit on the deacon-

ess path. “A lot of deaconesses have backgrounds in education and music, and for many of them it’s a second career. I was one of the youngest, and I thought, ‘I still don’t know what I’m doing here!’”

During her summer internship in Orlando, she figured it out.

“I was placed at Lutheran Haven, a nursing home filled with retired pastors. My job was to visit and bring God’s Word.” She soon realized that she didn’t know how to do visitations. Always the learner, she went to “school” in the nursing home with some of the best teachers. She began to discover her gifts, and today she focuses on visitations and the elderly.

After completing her class work, she interned at Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church and Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Bronx, New York, in 2009. Redeemer extended a Divine Call to Raquel, and she was commissioned and installed on September 19, 2010. In the Concordia Deaconess Conference, deaconesses are pinned by a sister deaconess. Raquel was delighted that her mother pinned her, not just as her mother but also as a fellow deaconess. “It was a touching mother-daughter moment I won’t forget.”

Her transition from Florida to New York was challenging. “Coming from Florida — where it’s hot, retired, and slow-paced — to New York where it’s fast in every way . . . driving, speaking, walking. It was a definite change!”

Eager to learn, Raquel embraced the big world of New York with its diversity. “At Redeemer, we have about twenty-five different cultural groups represented. It’s considered a mosaic congregation with people from Nigeria, Ghana, Guyana, the Caribbean, Europe, the USA, and many other places. It’s very eye-opening, and I learned that I had a lot to learn!”

Today, she has become more comfortable as a New Yorker. She carries her big tote bag filled with a water



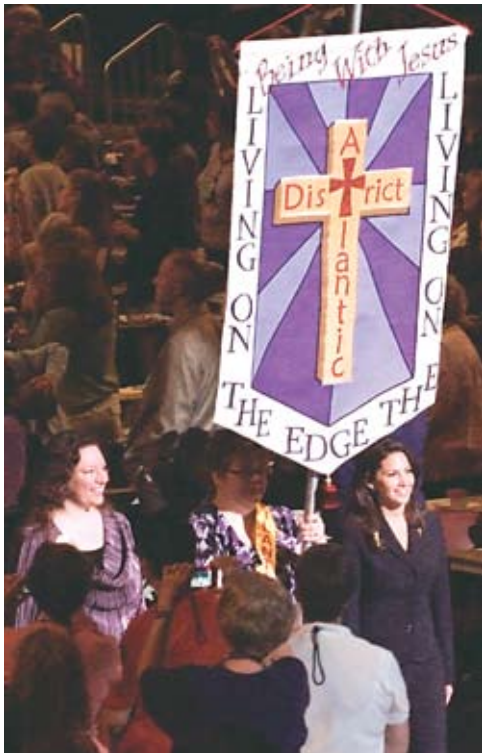


bottle, a pair of comfortable shoes, and an umbrella.

"You can't do heels all day long. When I'm in walking around the city, I wear my garb and my Naturalizers!"

As a New Yorker, the rest of her wardrobe has changed. "The saying here is that New Yorkers dress in black until something blacker comes out!" Raquel laughed. "That's so true! Everything I own is navy blue and black."

Learning to drive and to parallel park in the city were two of her greatest challenges. Her drive from home to church is short, about two miles, but she has to maneuver around buses and elevated trains and steel posts and lots of people, something new for this Florida gal. "It was scary at first!"



"I have a little Mazda, my little 'Megatron.' Sometimes I pray that it'll transform into something ... bigger ... smaller ... or an airplane to get me out of traffic!"

On her way to work, Raquel sees a whole different world. "Kids are running for the bus, trying to hold their books and hold their pants up because they insist on wearing them so low!"

She also sees a world of pain. "On my way to work, I go through what I call 'prostitute-ville' — and the women are out in full force. I see kids who are hurting, kids who aren't going to school. I see kids getting beat up and lured into the drug world."

When she first moved to New York, her mom wanted her to take a self-defense class. "I don't know kung-fu! I learned everything I need about self-defense growing up with a little brother," she laughs. "He wasn't easy on me!"

Still, like any big city resident, she doesn't walk alone at night, but she's always looking for opportunities to talk to the people. "A lot of people think New Yorkers are rude or unfriendly, but it's not true! These are beautiful people. Their accents may

be rough, but they mind their business, you mind your business, and that's it. When they see that you are for real, well, that's when conversations happen. That's when the Gospel can be shared."

One of Raquel's favorite Bible stories is Ezekiel and the valley of the dry bones.

"God brings us life when we are dead in our sins, not only for Ezekiel but for the dry bones in the Bronx or Orlando or Peoria. I see dead men walking all the time on the streets. Christ is ready and willing to save them and to be there for them, and that's when I just pray for them that God would send the Holy Spirit to bring them to faith and life."

Raquel takes every opportunity to reach out into her new community. "I'm nervous sometimes because I'm growing into who I am as a deaconess, and I sometimes don't think people want to hear what I have to say," she shares. "But then I realize that what I have to say is not coming from me. It's coming from the One who can relieve the stress, the One who can provide hope — Jesus Christ."

Raquel recalls one of her favorite Bible characters, Saint Stephen. "I admire his boldness. It's easy to be scared or to run away, but our Lord keeps our lives and makes us His witnesses, even if we die. He's going to use us for His purposes and for His glory."

And right now, the Lord is using her mightily in the midst of the concrete, steel, and noise of New York City, one thousand miles away from the Sunshine State she knows best.

When Raquel needs quiet, she finds it at work. "Life is hectic and loud and fast, but I can meditate in the church building. When I first got to New York, I loved all the music and the craziness of it all, but now I see the need to balance it with more quiet time."

Raquel's work at Redeemer is as colorful as the city in which she lives. The congregation was well prepared for a deaconess by a long-time member, Rosa Cruz-Molina, who served over nine years as Redeemer's Catechist. She wasn't a deaconess by training, according to Raquel, but because of her work, the congregation understood the role of deaconess. "They understood that a deaconess comes on behalf of Pastor, to assist him with visits to the homebound and infirm, counseling youth, women, children, single people, and married couples."

Raquel is involved in the many aspects of life at Redeemer, including work with the youth, the

elderly, people who want to learn Spanish, and the Women's Guild. But that short list of responsibilities doesn't begin to illustrate the work she is doing with hurting people.

Some days are filled with counseling struggling couples. Other days she visits the elderly. Many days she hangs out with youth, "some who have never seen their dads and whose moms are either drunk or drugged up." We open up the church and it's home. We have WiFi so they can get on Facebook and just hang out, eat, and talk about the Christian faith. Sometimes we have had kids who come off the street high, and they come hurt, but we don't turn them away because we know exactly where they are going to go if we do ... right back to where they came from. So we keep them and share God's Word with them," she explains.

Redeemer is a busy place for this twenty-six-year-old. "It's a sacrifice, but I love what I'm doing. The toughest part is that I can't do everything. I can't take away the hurt that other people are feeling. But thanks be to God that Christ heals us!"

Pastor Taylor shares how Raquel has dedicated herself to the work at Redeemer. "She is a humble vessel of Christ. Her vocational integrity and churchly commitment inspire many people to speak justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our Lord. We are so thankful that God has chosen to bless us by bringing such a dedicated worker and compassionate listener to us in the Bronx. As a true servant, she does not seek to be served but to serve and to offer her life so that others may live. With simplicity, authenticity, and grace through her merciful words and actions, she brings the saving Gospel of our one Savior Jesus Christ to the everyday people of the New York metropolitan area in beauty and in truth. By the power of the Holy Spirit, she encourages us in our work: "Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church, by God's grace, is a praying community of service that receives, teaches, celebrates, and shares Christ Jesus." [Mission Statement of Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Bronx, New York]

Raquel is quick to point out that much of the work in her congregation is accomplished through the lay people. "I have never seen anything like it, even in this huge city where everyone often keeps to themselves. They not only talk the talk, but they



walk the walk, and they dance the dance. I'm very happy and blessed to be here and serve with them. The lay people teach me so much."

In addition to her responsibilities at Redeemer, Raquel has become involved with the Atlantic District LWML serving as chairman of the Spiritual Life Committee. "I heard about the LWML since my mother was involved with it, and I thought, 'Okay, they wear purple and they do quilts and they have little boxes that I put my pennies in when I was a little girl.'"

Once she got involved, however, she discovered a much richer organization than she'd ever imagined. "These women are amazing in their prayer life. They aren't full-time church workers. They have their families and their full-time jobs, and yet they take time to do all of this mission work for people they don't even know! Awesome!

"I look at me and think, I'm a deaconess. My full-time "thing" is to care for the sick, help the poor, be with the lost. But the LWML women do this all the time," she said.

At a recent district convention, Raquel was privileged to meet President Janice Wendorf and to be selected to attend the convention in Peoria as a Young Woman Representative. "I'm excited to go to this convention to learn more about LWML and YWRs. One of my responsibilities right now is to get more women to be YWRs, and attending the convention will help because I'll have a story to tell."

One thing that will be in her suitcase? Her iPhone. She doesn't leave home without it. "I



have the App for *Treasury of Daily Prayer*, and I'm thankful because that prayer book is really thick!" She starts every day with her devotions, and when she's on the road, she can read on her phone. "Love it! And I love my iPhone. It keeps me organized!"

This deaconess in the city is continually learning. "I keep learning that I'm a sinner and keep experiencing the amazing grace of God through Christ Jesus. When I'm weak, He is strong. That's when He surprises me!"



Raquel's family at her graduation.

In her free time, Raquel enjoys hanging out with her sister in Manhattan. "It has been a blessing to have her as my support. We go to Broadway shows or running or biking in Central Park. Bike riding through the city is insane with all the taxis and everything!" Her adventures in the city, she explains, remind her that she's still Raquel A. Rojas, not only Deaconess Rojas.

And the food. She loves the food. "I love the food in the city. Authentic New York pizza. Did you know that the reason the New York pizzas are so great is because of the water? And the cheesecake. And Chinese. But I also love all the authentic food from other parts of the world at our church potlucks!"

Most of all, she cherishes the opportunities she has to feast at the Lord's Table. "I have found a greater appreciation for the body and the blood of Christ and for the extravagant grace that God gives us in the Divine Service."

And on the streets of New York, Deaconess Rojas loves to hear the little children in the church neighborhood singing, "This is the feast of victory for our God. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia! Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be people of God...."

And for this deaconess in the city, that beats Sinatra every day.