

On The Eagles' Wings, Aslan Renews Its Mission

By Eileen Moon

RED BANK - Doug and Kathryn Eagles aren't exactly newcomers to Aslan Youth Ministries - each of them worked with Aslan earlier in their careers. But when they returned to the organization last year, they were charged with a special mission - to step into the shoes of Aslan's founders, Craig and Lynn Ann Bogard, and lead Aslan into the future.

The Bogards established Aslan in Red Bank 33 years ago for the purpose of providing children born into struggling families in Monmouth County's urban areas with the tools they need to grow into successful human beings.



It was a mission fueled by the power of the Bogards' strong Christian faith and named for the lion in the children's series by C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. "They were inspired by C.S. Lewis and wanted to create something that was Christ-centered," said Kathryn Eagles, who taught school in the Bronx and at Holy Cross in Rumson before her return to Aslan.

In the book, the lion is a Christ-like figure that sacrifices his life to save a child. Aslan uses a quote from the book in its literature: "Oh Aslan, he whispered. "If you will not come yourself, at least send me the helpers from beyond this world."

For more than three decades, the Bogards and their small group of staff and volunteers became "the helpers from beyond this world" for children in Red Bank, Long Branch and Asbury Park whose world was often a dark and difficult place. For these children, Aslan established nondemoninational Christian-education classes. They also built a network of volunteers to provide academic tutoring, mentorship and support to families in need.

For more than three decades, the Bogards invested their lives in the Aslan mission. But during the past few years, the Bogards twice experienced the deepest tragedy a parent can imagine: the loss of a child.

After the deaths of their two sons, the Bogards decided to relinquish their management of Aslan's day-to-day affairs and, in memory and honor of their sons, concentrate on Aslan's work in Haiti, where the organization has long had a mission project.

A two-river native, Doug Eagles worked with Aslan for three years before enrolling in graduate school at The New School University in New York City, where he spent four years earning a master's degree in Conflict Resolution in the Middle East.

It was Doug who introduced Kathryn, a Pennsylvania native, to Aslan during the couple's college years, and they both began working for the organization.

An integral part of the Aslan effort is focused on character development. The Bogards and their team of volunteers sought to provide children with the inner resources to survive the challenges of a less than ideal environment.

Each year, Aslan children train rigorously for a 60-mile round trip bike ride and campout. Each year also, teens from Aslan travel to Haiti to volunteer as "helpers from beyond the world" in what is one of the poorest countries on the face of the earth. Aslan has purchased land in Haiti and established a permanent mission. Because of the level of poverty and the challenges of the environment, Aslan teens must be 15 or older in order to join the Haiti trip.

While helping in Haiti, the children from New Jersey gain insight into the opportunities available to them here in the United States despite their personal circumstances. They also gain awareness of the gifts they have to give others.

"No-one has ever really told them that, as a 10 year old, you have something to offer them," Kathryn said.

Helping Aslan children come to that realization is part of the organization's commitment to creating "servant leaders," who, having become aware of their strengths, are then able to use those strengths to help others.

"We want to model that which we are trying to instill in them, and the best way to do that is to live it out," Kathryn said. "To be a servant, you must serve. We want to be an example for the kids of what a servant leader looks like."

The organization receives financial support from local foundations, from United Way and through fundraising and donations from individuals, but funds are chronically tight. "We try to maintain a diversified funding base," Doug said.

Aslan counts its rewards for these efforts one child at a time, and over the decades, the rewards have been numerous: teachers, nurses, a chef; an engineer; a naval scientist who, before his retirement, served as commander of the Mediterranean fleet.

That Aslan graduate, Chris Butler, now resides in Australia, where he hopes to establish a similar organization, the Eagles said. "That reflects the level of impact on someone like Chris Butler," Doug noted. "He was a survivor of a series of rigorous circumstances.

Aslan was able to come in and walk side by side with him. He made what most people observe to be a very successful life. Now, he wants to give hope..."

There are many more success stories in Aslan, the Eagles, say, citing the children who overcame fears, triumphed over obstacles and grew up to be grounded human beings, good parents and contributing members of society.

Aslan children who are interested in pursuing higher education after high school are eligible for scholarships. To date, Aslan has funded scholarships for students attending Brookdale Community College, the College of New Jersey, Delaware State, Cheyney University, Westminster Choir College, Baltimore International College, Bethune-Cookman College, George Mason University, George State and Clark Atlanta College.

But 33 years after the organization was founded, there are many more children still in need; still living in poverty, still needing help from beyond their world. Aslan serves approximately 250 kids each year in Red Bank, Long Branch and Asbury Park areas.

They do so with the help of some 300 volunteers whose roles range from tutoring to providing recreation opportunities to sharing with the kids the things they know and love, from cooking classes to camping trips.

"The core of what we do is relationally based," Kathryn said. "If you have a volunteer who says, 'I love cooking. It's something I'm passionate about,' then that volunteer is encouraged to share that passion with the children they mentor. "It enables personal relationships to flower," Kathryn continued. "Maybe a mentoring relationship grows out of that, and they become much more involved at a deeper level."

Aslan volunteers come by referral from the Volunteer Center of Monmouth County, from local churches and high schools, including Red Bank Catholic, Rumson-Fair Haven Regional High School and Christian Brothers Academy.

With the transition in leadership, the Eagles say, Aslan is in a time of asking questions. "What does it mean to be Aslan? What does it mean to serve the kids that we serve? Where do we want to be in five years.?"

It is time, they say, to imagine new possibilities and find ways to better serve children who encounter daunting challenges every day of their lives.

Gang activity is growing in the communities they serve, the Eagles say, and the dynamics of the situation in which children in these struggling neighborhoods find themselves are changing. It is their mission "to meet needs and create opportunities" that will help the children they serve find their way to a better world.

To do that, they are again seeking the help of the wider community. "We are chronically underfunded, chronically understaffed," Kathryn said. "We are always looking for more volunteers." To volunteer, donate or obtain further information about Aslan, call (732) 741-7824 or visit the organization's Web site at aslanyouth.org.