Minister Enjoys Maintenance Work At McDowell High

By CAROL LANE
Staff Writer

Robert Vance practices his religious faith just as staunchly mowing grass at McDowell High School as when he's speaking from the pulpit of his church.

But, at school, he's low-key about it.

"Most of the students probably don't even know I'm a minister," said the high school's maintenance man. "I don't do any preaching here. I just do the best job I can. And I don't interact with the students a lot beyond saying 'Hi' to them.

"Of course, I am available if one of them wants to talk. Then I just listen."

Vance calls his work at McDowell High "my second job."

His first job is serving as pastor of Roland Chapel Baptist Church. But he puts in the most hours on his second job — at least 40 a week, beginning at about 5:15 every week-day morning.

He's there that early to unlock all the gates and doors, check the boiler, does whatever is necessary to get the day going for students and staff alike.

The rest of each day, he's most often found out on the grounds. He mows all the grass, trims the bushes, mulches the flower beds on pretty days and does indoor repair work in rougher weather.

"I love the outdoors," he said. "That's why I like this job so much."

For a while, Vance was a full-time minister. But currently his church cannot afford to pay him enough to warrant his not holding a second job.

"It's OK," he said. "I like being here at school. And I'm off at 2 every day, so that's enough time to prepare my sermons and make my pastoring visits."

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Vance doesn’t lecture the hundreds of students he sees each day, but if he could, he’d tell them, “Stay in school and take advantage of all the opportunities while you’re here.”

“I’m amazed at all the programs this school offers. It’s just like a junior college — everything from auto mechanics to cosmetology to carpentry. If I were a student now I’d pack in every skill I could.”

Vance says he’s the living example of one who did not take advantage of opportunities in his youth.

“I dropped out of school in the 11th grade,” he said.

He said he moved to North Cove when he was 12. His mother, a single parent at the time, was transferred there from Bristol, Tenn., by American Thread.

“I thought my mother had brought me to the end of the world,” he said. “I missed my friends and all the activity in Bristol so much. And there really wasn’t much offered at North Cove back then except academics.”

Vance has continued to improve himself educationally since high school. He’s obtained his GED and studied to be a machinist and a minister.

He’s been a minister for about 15 years.

“I didn’t grow up with any reliance on God,” he said. “My wife, Ann, was the one who most influenced me for good. She took the children to church when I was home in bed on a Sunday morning. I eventually joined the church. But it was several years before God truly spoke to my heart and I dedicated myself to Him and His work.”

After that, he became active in Catawba Heights Baptist Church, teaching Sunday School and serving as a deacon. Gradually, he started preaching.

Vance and his wife, the former Ann Williams, have three daughters, Gina Ateles and Robin and Angela Vance, all grown. And Gina, who lives in Norfolk, Va., has presented them two grandchildren, Jessica and Alex Ateles.

“These grandchildren are really something special,” Vance said. “I always thought grandparents who doted on their grandchildren were silly. But now I understand.”

Vance has worked in several industries and can return to his work as a machinist. But he hasn’t.

“I like working here at McDowell High better,” he said. “I have the flexibility to get my work done and still be out for a while conducting a funeral or making a hospital visit.”

“Besides, I enjoy following Titan athletics so much.”

The school appreciates his support of the athletic program. Last year he was invited to give the invocation at the school’s sports banquet. Once there, he was surprised by the announcement that the school’s coaches had voted him the school’s “Friend of the Titans” award.

“I don’t miss a ball game,” he said, “unless it’s for church business.”

“Church business is the only thing I put ahead of supporting the Titans.”