

'Father Catfish' commemorated lakeside

When Kristen McIsaac went to her first confession at Christ the King junior high school in Leduc, she had no idea the priest – Father Michael (Catfish) Mireau – would make a lasting impact on her.

✘ “We would go to confession and we would just talk to him for hours,” said Kristen, one of many students who were drawn to Mireau, the pastor at St. Michael’s Parish at the time. “He was just so different from other priests. He liked *Star Wars* and he wore Superman shirts.”

Father Mireau died of cancer on Sept. 22, 2014, at age 42. He was chaplain of the Edmonton Catholic School District and a passionate supporter of Camp Encounter, an archdiocesan summer camp at Lac La Nonne, northwest of Edmonton. It’s where he is buried and where, as a camp leader, he got the nickname Catfish, based on his childhood hobby of drawing cartoon catfish.

In Edmonton, Father Mireau is memorialized with a year-old school that bears his name and an Edmonton Catholic School Foundation endowment fund.

Now, thanks to Kristen, the Knights of Columbus, and individual donors, the beloved priest is also honoured in Leduc, just south of Edmonton, with a black and beige wooden bench on a boardwalk by Telford Lake.

“He was in Edmonton way less than he was in Leduc so I thought, ‘Why can’t Leduc have something?’ I think this is the only thing for him in Leduc,” said Kristen, now 24.

The bench was purchased under the City of Leduc’s commemorative bench program, which offers a permanent tribute to a loved one in one of the city’s natural spaces.



Father Mireau's memorial bench features a plaque bearing his favourite scripture.

Emblazoned on the custom plaque is the text of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life,” as well as the words “God is love,” which was Father Mireau’s mantra.

“‘God is love’ is what he said all the time,” said Kristen. “And I think it just makes people feel better.”

“(Father) Mike was such a positive influence to myself and many other people. He was always available to talk and counsel during my adolescence and he helped me navigate my tough times.”

Kristen and her friends also helped Father Mireau navigate his own tough times, especially after his cancer diagnosis. They met him for dinner, drinks, and walks with his canine sidekick, Nemo.

“He brought his dog to Mass and to the school all the time,” said Kristen. “I thought it was awesome because I love animals.”

Father Mireau was very involved with local youth, and fittingly, many young donors helped raise the \$2,500 needed for the cost of the bench, plaque, engraving and installation. The bench was unveiled last June, after more than a year of fundraising.

“When I was asking for donations for the bench, other people my age and younger were donating, which I found surprising that they would donate to a priest’s bench,” said Kristen. “But tons of people messaged me and said, ‘I’m so glad you’re doing this. He really influenced me.’”

“He made religion relatable,” she added. “The way he explained the Bible and the Ten Commandments answered many of the ‘Why?’ questions. He is greatly missed.”

The bench sits in front of St. Michael’s Parish, where Kristen’s dad, Matthew McIsaac, remembers listening to Father Mireau’s sermons and his unique style.



Father Catfish and his beloved dog Nemo

“Father Mike was a real firecracker. He was a great orator when he was doing his sermons and he would be quite animated – even barking like his dog on the pulpit.”

“You would think that that would put off a lot of people, but it didn’t. He was able to pull it off,” Matthew said.

“Maybe that’s the way you go about it, getting young people into the church. Somebody has to reach out to the younger generation.”

Matthew McIsaac is also Grand Knight of the Knights of Columbus Father Leduc Council 7061, which donated \$1,000 toward the construction of the bench.

“I thought it was an admirable idea,” he said. “When (Father Mireau) passed away, I think everyone was surprised by how many young people he impacted.”

Despite Father Mireau's larger-than-life personality, the bench is set against the serenity of Telford Lake.

"I don't think he'd want anything flashy. He was a firecracker in his personality but he did it to impact peoples' lives," Kristen said. "He wouldn't want a big statue or anything."

Kristen hopes the bench will keep Father Mireau's memory alive, and inspire young people to help others. She hopes it will also draw them to his website and his YouTube channel, where he posted hundreds of videos aimed at his young followers.

"They might wonder why this priest has a bench, so maybe they'll look him up and find his YouTube channel or his Facebook page. He relates to everyone, not everything he talks about is religion."

Father Mireau's videos, homilies and social media posts can be found on his website, fathercatfish.com.