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Youth minister combines entertainment, outreach with Fur Circus

by Tim Lilley by Catholic News Service

EVANSVILLE, IND. -- Meet Rob Montepare, aka Buddy the bear of the Fur Circus.

He and his fellow "enfurainers" -- Myles the monkey, Splash the elephant and Rizzo the ringmaster -- work almost year-round at professional baseball and hockey events across North America.

Montepare also serves as youth minister at St. Jude the Apostle Parish in Sandy Springs, Ga., a northern suburb of Atlanta. He started his ministerial duties there about the same time he and a handful of friends created the Fur Circus.

And he sees a definite connection between the two roles.

"Our young people are fortunate to have had such wonderful popes in recent years. Blessed Pope John Paul II taught us what we believe, and Pope Benedict XVI taught us why we believe," he said. "Now, Pope Francis is challenging all of us to just go do it. I agree -- we have to stop talking about it and make it happen," he told *The Message*, the Evansville diocesan newspaper.

The troupe planned to be in Evansville Dec. 28 to perform at the Ford Center, when the local hockey team, the IceMen, squares off against its in-state rival, the Fort Wayne Komets.

Montepare uses Pope Francis' challenge as his youth ministry goal, and he also sees a parallel with the time he spends in character as Buddy. He traces the connection back to his first community-outreach appearance after being hired several years ago to become "Sluggerrr," the mascot of the Kansas City Royals.

"There was a youngster fighting brain cancer who had reached the point of being in hospice care," Montepare recalled. "He was a huge Royals fan, and he wanted to meet Sluggerrr. During the visit, everyone saw that his illness seemed to go away for a few hours, and he and his family shared some joy and peace. All of us in the Fur Circus have been mascots for various teams, and we all have stories like that."

Those stories -- and Montepare's ministry-- are the reasons the Fur Circus crew places such a priority on community outreach wherever they appear.

"All of us have seen the opportunities we have to make a difference -- even with a short visit to children and families," he explained. "We have made that a priority since the Fur Circus started in 2011, and it helps us to stand out."

Back in Sandy Springs, Montepare uses an approach similar to the mascot business in building a youth ministry team at St. Jude the Apostle.

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"There are six of us who are part of Fur Circus, but only four characters -- Buddy, Myles, Rizzo and Splash. We rotate our work," he explained. "In a similar way, I believe that building a ministry on one person's shoulders is wrong. My priority since taking the job at St. Jude the Apostle has been to develop the right group of people who can serve our parish as a team.

"This is a relational ministry," he added. "I develop relationships with the young people in our parish, and the entire team does. Everybody's situation is unique and different, and we have to get to know them ... to be sensitive to that. We must do that to know whether we're really accomplishing anything. We have to make our parish youth programs more than just entertainment."

[Lilley is editor of *The Message*, newspaper of the Diocese of Evansville, Ind.]

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