

## **“Programs like Rosary Makers of America make God smile”**

March 21 is World Down Syndrome Day. For this date, the newsletter of the archdiocese of Atlanta approached the offices of Rosary Makers of America, a training program started by Nicholas Kemdi Ihenacho, a doctor who met Opus Dei in Nigeria.

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Nicholas Kemdi Ihenacho is a doctor specializing in kidney disease. 63 years old, he grew up in Nigeria in a Christian family. Upon arriving at the university, he faced a crisis of faith that he overcame in his third year of studying medicine when – thanks to the formational activities at Ugwuoma Study Center – he rediscovered the Catholic faith.

He continued his medical training in the United States, where he began working as a doctor. Over the years, his family continued to grow and their fifth child, Ikenna, was born with Down Syndrome. When Ikenna was older, Nicholas decided to teach his son how to make rosaries with a simple and ingenious system. Ikenna enjoyed this work greatly. His father, like so many other parents with children like Ikenna, was concerned when he learned that educational activities for young people with

disabilities often ended between the ages of 18 and 21.

One day an inspiration came to him as he watched Ikenna stringing the rosary beads together with great pride. Thus Rosary Makers of America came into being, a small nonprofit organization where young people with various disabilities make rosaries, which are then delivered to parishes to support the program and cover other expenses with donations.

“In Opus Dei I learned that work is our vocation. You give of yourself and it’s not just to make money. It is serving your neighbor and giving of yourself,” says Kemdi Ihenacho. This is the message he tries to convey in Rosary Makers of America, in which other parents and educators take part.

**A gift for parents and children**

Seated at a small table, Gloria Sowers, along with her mother, Sharon, is working with the rosary beads. In the future, someone will use Gloria's creation to count the traditional Marian prayers that make up the rosary.

Gloria, 33, who has been diagnosed with autism, learned to love working with beads at home. So the Rosary Makers of America office has become her favorite place. "She is doing what she likes. She isn't alone. And she is happy," says Sharon, who is in her 60s. She and her husband, Scott, have produced an independent film called *Special Needs*.

Her daughter has improved a lot here. "Everyone we know has a rosary. But one made by Gloria is special," says Sharon proudly. "This is a gift to us. It is a peaceful and serene environment."

Jessie Moreau, a retired special education teacher, comes to help the young people there. She calls it a "faith-based vocational training program." With Rosary Makers, the women and men taking part gain valuable experience, practice social interaction and learn to work autonomously. Moreau, who is on the organization's board of directors, says that she has seen the young people come out of their isolation and greet people with hellos and goodbyes. They also practice valuable self-help skills, such as using the microwave in the small kitchen, etc.

At this office in suburban Stone Mountain, Georgia, the day begins with prayer and pauses at noon to recite the Angelus. Young people sit at their desks with bowls of supplies and other tools used to count out rosary beads. The rosaries are then distributed to local parishes, where

people can make a donation to help support the non-profit organization.

## **Supporting the dignity of all men and women**

Maggie Rousseau, director of the Disabilities Ministry for the Archdiocese of Atlanta, recently met at Rosary Makers with people from Atlanta Deaf Catholics. Group members were creating rosaries to take to the Pastoral Week of the National Catholic Office for the Deaf, held in Savannah.

Rousseau emphasized that purposeful employment for people with disabilities and deafness supports the dignity of all people. She said that programs like Rosary Makers are vital to the emotional, social and occupational needs of adults living with developmental disabilities, since faith-based employment options for people with disabilities are few and far between.

“Often they are not chosen to fill a position because of the assumption that they lack skills to be independent, or companies do not understand how someone with a disability can be employable,” Rousseau said.

“Having a developmental disability does not exclude a person from having a relationship with God. I would say just the opposite, their relationship is pure,” Rousseau says. “And I know that programs like Rosary Makers of America make God smile.”

“Every morning they have a job to go to and keep busy working for God,” Nicholas Kemdi says, looking fondly at his son.

*Based on the article Art, prayer and companionship goals of Rosary Makers, from "The Georgia Bulletin" of the Archdiocese of Atlanta, with additional remarks from the promoter*

*of the organization, Nicholas Kemdi Ihenacho.*

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