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Pastor Rocky Angone kneeling for his daily prayer at the Chester gazebo.

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BY AMANDA CREASEY ON JULY 15, 2020

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Pastor Rocky Angone prays daily in Chester gazebo

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The gazebo situated in the heart of Chester on West Hundred Road has become familiar to many Chester residents as a symbol of the quaint village they call home. Mid-morning motorists driving through the Village might recently have become familiar with another sight: a T-shirt clad man kneeling down in the gazebo, two dogs waiting patiently on the bench behind him. Meet Pastor Rocky Angone, and his two canine companions, 12-year-old Madelyn and puppy Cooper.

Angone felt called to begin praying in the gazebo in September 2017 after reading 1 Timothy 4:13 in his New American Standard Bible. In the verse, the Apostle Paul instructs Timothy “not to neglect the public reading of Scripture.’ As I read, I felt the Lord nudge me to do this, read the Bible in public.”

Later that month, Angone began searching for the right spot. “The gazebo jumped out at me,” he said. “I believe the Lord led me there because it is the perfect place to read and pray.” He requested permission from the property owner to read the Bible there on a daily basis, and he began his daily readings on Jan. 1, 2018. “I found a format to read the Bible through in a year and began using that. At that time the Lord told me to pray for my nation, as well as reading the Scriptures.”

More than two years later, Pastor Rocky continues his daily vigils at the gazebo, arriving every morning around 10:00, which he explained is the right time because by then, “the sun has risen enough that the inside [of the gazebo] is in the shade. This Virginia summer sun is hot.” His two dogs, Madelyn and Cooper, accompany him in the shade under the gazebo. Prior to Cooper’s arrival in the family, Madelyn was joined by a Maltese named Gabriel, whom the family lost last year.

According to Pastor Rocky, Madelyn and Gabriel were inseparable. “When I started coming to the gazebo, they were waiting at the door to go so I hooked them up and took them. They continued coming with me,” he said. “I put a small rug on the bench so they wouldn’t slip through and they would wait for me to finish.” After his prayer time, Pastor Rocky would often head over to The Village Grill, which he said has become his “official headquarters.” There, the owners would always fix something special for his dogs. “Mady and Gabe have enjoyed ham, turkey, and ice cream there for years.”

Recently, Madelyn gained her new companion: Cooper. “Now Cooper accompanies me and Mady wherever we go,” Pastor Rocky said.

While Pastor Rocky is currently working to produce short, to-the-point sermons that he hopes to post on social media sites, he said he is not in the gazebo “to draw a crowd and preach. The Lord specifically said that I was to pray

and read His Word to Him. This is especially hard for an old musician/preacher who wants to get a bullhorn and preach the Word of God and tell everyone about Jesus. Again, He said no. I had to be obedient.”

When Pastor Rocky isn't reading his Bible in the shade of the gazebo, he is praying there. “I pray over my family, friends, neighbors, community, state, and nation. I pray over the leadership. I pray over our military, law enforcement, firefighters, first responders, doctors, nurses, medical providers, teachers, and pastors.”

Though his current morning routine of reading and prayer is peaceful, Pastor Rocky has not always led such a serene existence.

“I am a combat veteran of the Vietnam War,” he said “I served in Air Cavalry Troop of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment from 1968 to 1969. I was a crew chief/door gunner on a UH1C Huey Helicopter, lovingly referred to as a ‘Charlie Model Gunship.’” He attributes his surviving the war to God. “The Lord was gracious in that I survived unscathed physically,” he said. Still, life, although he'd kept his, was not easy for Pastor Rocky when he returned home from Vietnam. “I faced many challenges over the years, and I had many setbacks. I felt as though I did not fit in anywhere. I went through a divorce, which set me back even further.” To help himself cope, he started playing music on his old Fender bass again and purchased a motorcycle so he could “run the road.” Music and motorcycles, Pastor Rocky said, eventually landed him in the “outlaw” scene, and he began to feel like something of a cowboy.

Pastor Rocky's various experiences as a soldier, musician, and “cowboy” attracted him to the idea of Cowboy Church.

“Cowboy Church is a somewhat generic name,” he said. “It began as pastors would hold services at rodeos and other out-of-the-way places where a church was not available.” In the spirit of Cowboy Church, Pastor Rocky said he has “held services in horse barns, motorcycle shops, and street corners.” And he is not alone. “I have heard of several pastors that held services in bars that close long enough on Sunday morning before opening for business,” he said. “There are several Cowboy Churches that hold services in the afternoon/early evening and have pot luck dinners. When you walk into a church and everyone is in jeans, cowboy hats, boots, [and] spurs...some in chaps, and the preacher is dressed the same way, you have found a Cowboy Church.”

Due to the mobile and flexible nature of his preaching, Pastor Rocky has come to call himself a “circuit rider.” He said, “The original circuit riders were mostly Methodist ministers from the late 1700s to the late 1800s. They were called Saddlebag Preachers, traveling clergy, and of course, Circuit Riders.” According to Pastor Rocky, in between two- and six-weeks' time, these preachers would complete a circuit of 200 to 500 miles on horseback, toting their Bibles, prayer books, hymnals, sermon texts, and fishing line in their saddlebags.

“The Circuit Riders were ordinary men who had had an extraordinary, dramatic conversion,” Pastor Rocky said. “They were not formally educated. They had no prepared sermons, notes, or manuscripts.” When a Circuit Rider preached a sermon, “the only way to tell the preacher from the audience was which side of the pulpit he was on.”

In 1972, Pastor Rocky met a Methodist minister named Bob Livermon from Powhatan, Va. “He called himself the Circuit Rider. He rode around the county on horseback and had a 5-minute TV show called ‘Justice and the Circuit Rider.’ Justice was a retired race horse.” Several years ago, Livermon’s family granted Pastor Rocky permission to revive the program, a project he is working on now.

In the meantime, he continues his prayerful work in the gazebo, along with Madelyn and Cooper. Despite what he sees as God’s orders to merely read and pray in the gazebo, Pastor Rocky admits that “a while back I got to thinking, maybe I could help others if everyone knew what I was doing. I thought about contacting the Village News and some other news sources. I got a resounding No! God spoke to me. He said to wait on Him. All I had to do was be obedient and leave everything to Him. When He wanted something to happen, He would make it happen. It was four days later that you walked up to the gazebo and spoke with me. It had to be God, because I had never met you before then.”

In addition to drawing the attention of the local newspaper, Pastor Rocky has experienced several other positive occurrences at the gazebo. “I had one young man drive by and turn around and come back and talk to me,” he said. “Another young man accepted Jesus there. It is amazing how well things work out when I stay out of it and let God take over.”

Pastor Rocky hopes to continue his morning prayers at the gazebo as long as the Lord allows, along with his dogs. “They will protect me from marauding cats, leaves and paper bags that are blowing around,” he said. “I will pray for my nation and read God’s Holy Word to Him until He says differently.”

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