



## BROTHERS OF THE SACRED HEART

### VOCATION NEWSLETTER

#### BRO. LEE BARKER'S ENCHANTING LIFE

*By George Gurtner*



FRANK METHE PHOTOGRAPH

BAY ST. LOUIS, Miss.:

*(Vocation Director's Note: The following article appeared in the November 2013 issue of New Orleans Magazine. It describes the "magical" ministry of Bro. Lee Barker and was written by George Gurtner. Bro. Lee currently lives in Mobile, AL and ministers at McGill-Toolen High School.)*

Two pre-teen kids who, except for their mega-bucks Nikes, look like they've just stepped out of a Norman Rockwell painting, are eyeballing the holy grail itself: The Heisman Trophy.

College football's highest award was donated to St. Stanislaus School long ago by perhaps its most famous alumni, Felix "Doc" Blanchard, of West Point fame.

The two boys are mesmerized.

Mesmerized, that is, until another great light of the Gulf Coast School walks past a far door and the two kids instinctively know that something magical is about to happen. They turn around on a dime.

The attraction today – as it is every day each summer, and at McGill-Toolen High School in Mobile, Ala., throughout the school year – is Brother Lee Barker, the 86-year-old Sacred Heart brother who once served as principal of the former St. Aloysius High School at Rampart and Esplanade avenues in New Orleans.

“At various times in my life I had just about every title you could think of,” Barker says, “I’ve been teacher, principal, coach, athletic director, vocations director, provincial for my order ... I lived out of my suitcase for so long.”

The Thibodaux native spends his school days as a guidance services counselor at McGill-Toolen and when summers roll around he heads over to St. Stanislaus where he gives “character talks” to the camp-goers each morning.

And through it all there’s the rabbit waiting to be pulled out of the hat (even if Barker has to make his own rabbit out of a handkerchief), the playing card that appears from behind a kid’s ear, the one coin that’s transformed into two. Doc Blanchard was good, but Brother Lee Barker is “something else,” as one youngster puts it.

“I don’t care how old a person is, 10 or 100, when a magician starts performing, that person will perk up and pay attention,” Barker says. “Long ago, back in the 1980s, one of my jobs was to talk to students about church ministry: becoming priests, brothers and nuns. Well, I thought if my audience wasn’t hostile, they would at least be indifferent. I knew I needed an icebreaker ... that’s when I got into magic. It worked then. It works now.”

In 1982 Barker got in touch with a St. Stanislaus alum who had performed magic at his former school and who, as luck would have it, happened to be the president of the International Brotherhood of Magicians. Barker convinced the man to “teach me three tricks.” The next week, he went back to the magician and, “I asked him to teach me three more.” You can guess how many return visits the brother made to the magician.

And now that he has a repertoire that would keep Houdini busy for a month. He is always anxious to show those sleights of hand as he travels between Pensacola and New Orleans more times throughout the year than a Greyhound bus: schools, hospitals, nursing homes ... just about any not-for-profit organization that operates to care for others; if there’s a crowd in need of a smile or a whimsical diversion, you can bet Brother Lee Barker, S.C. will be right there in the middle.

The cost of a visit from the magical man of the cloth? “Not a cent,” Barker says. “My payment comes from seeing the smile on the face of an elderly lady who’s in a wheelchair or a child who has cancer.

That’s a joy that’s worth more than all the money in the world.”

“The man is incredible,” says Melissa McNichol, the executive director of Camp Rap-A-Hope, a fun-in-the-sun camp outside Mobile for children who have, or who have had cancer, where Barker is almost a fixture. “I’ve never seen anybody with a more generous heart or who has more of a rapport with children. We’ll have youngsters swimming in the lake or off involved in some other activity and when they see Brother Lee, they come flying out that water or from whatever it is they’re doing just to see him perform his magic tricks.” She continues, “In addition to the summer camp, we have family outings for the children and their families and Brother Lee comes to all of them. I wish he could be here every day.”

The call to chow at St. Stanislaus, as it is at McGill-Toolen and with any other place to which the tall, avuncular religious brother brings his traveling magical show, quickly dissolves into the same

scenario: kids stand in line for food, kids eat quickly and kids quickly disperse and reassemble around the table where Brother Lee sits.

Eyes grow wide and mouths drop open and the dialogue is always peppered with “Wow!” “How in the world did he do that?” and “Brother do that one again ... slowly this time.”

Barker flips and flops a white handkerchief and asks a student to yank on one end of it. In an instant, all that twisting and turning transforms into a rabbit. There is applause all around and the crowd around the lunch table grows.

“I do about 150 tricks in all,” Barker says. “I add to the repertoire little by little. I also teach magic. That’s what my clubs are all about. At one time I had four magic clubs in three different states.” He continues, “After Katrina, however, the trips from Mobile to New Orleans got a little heavy. I used to come to Stanislaus for a meeting, spend the night with the brothers then go to New Orleans and head back to Mobile the next day. Well after the storm, the brothers here lived in trailers. There was no room for guests. I had to let go of one of the clubs in New Orleans. But I was fortunate; a professional magician took my place there.”

A cafeteria worker comes up and comments on Barker’s stamina and says, “It’s amazing how you just keep going and going.”

“It’s not magic,” Barker says. “I see a lot of doctors ... for preventative maintenance.”

Even as the kids filter out of the cafeteria and off toward their next planned activities, Brother Lee Barker sits with a friend at a table and can’t help fidgeting with an unknown gadget that just promises to pour forth a genie. He looks toward the door through which the last kid has disappeared. He smiles.

“I’ve had a lot of jobs during my career,” he says. “I never cried leaving any of them ... except one: an orphanage. There were kids there from 6 to 17 years of age. I spent two weeks with them. These were kids that nobody wanted. You knew they were so dependent on you and that you had this marvelous opportunity to put something, some meaning into their lives ... to let them know they meant something ... that they had worth. The brothers took care of them and I realized that I was a brother and it all came into clear focus. I guess over my lifetime I’ve touched the lives of maybe 25,000 kids and I’m still doing it ... at my age. And I still love it! That’s the real magic!”

***Congratulations, Bro. Lee!***