



# THE LOOP

outStanding in the field

pizza grill.

## Making Pizza, Making a Difference

by Heather Rote Faller

It's Friday night at the Eagle Harbor Loop Pizza Grill in Orange Park, Florida. "Order number 171," announces a voice over the loudspeaker. Order 171 is a bacon cheddar burger with homemade chips and a milkshake. Behind the counter, young employees are tossing salads and whipping shakes. The soda machine needs ice, another order is coming in, and the secret-recipe pizza sauce is about to bubble over.

That's when Becci Curtis ('05B), associate pastor for youth ministry at Orange Park Presbyterian Church, walks in. Curtis works at the Loop, too, but she takes orders of a different kind. She is a restaurant chaplain.

Paid by the restaurant, Curtis has a simple job description: to support the staff, whether that means chopping lettuce or conversing with an employee about a personal problem. "Some kids feel there are not a lot of people who care about them, and often they don't even know how to care for each other," she says. "This is one way to represent God's love to them. I tell them my job is to be available if they want to talk about anything." "Anything" includes school problems, credit cards, the Super Bowl, or even the manager. The conversations are completely confidential.

The idea for the restaurant chaplain is credited to Mike Schneider, cofounder and CEO of the Loop. Schneider was in the restaurant business for years before he became a Christian, and then he considered pursuing full-time ministry. He shared his struggle with a group of business executives, who suggested that perhaps the restaurant was his calling, and that he should look for opportunities to minister where he was. Nine years later, there are seven chaplains covering

Loop restaurants in Florida, with plans to expand the program to other states. The chaplains gather with a chaplain coordinator every six weeks to share experiences and get support.

Most of the restaurant chaplains are trained youth pastors. "Like many quick-service and fast-casual restaurants, many of our employees are young," says Schneider. "Many suffer from dysfunctional homes, or problems at school. The chaplains are a resource for these kids." And a witness. "What they see in our chaplains is often the only thing they see of church," he says.

The chaplains' ministry extends outside the restaurant, too. When employees started asking questions about the movie *The Passion of Christ*, Schneider paid for tickets for any employee who wanted to go, and for coffee afterward. He sees this kind of support as part of his responsibility as an employer both to his staff and to their parents, who entrust him with their children. "Parents have thanked me for the difference a chaplain made in their child's life," he says.

Nineteen-year-old Tamika Atwell, a full-time college student and a full-time service leader at the Loop where Curtis works, agrees that Curtis's presence makes a difference. "We don't always know who is talking to her, but we know people do. Everyone trusts her," Atwell says. Dani Feliciano, owner with her husband of Curtis's Loop franchise, says that finding a chaplain helped her team function better.

Feliciano adds that the purpose of the chaplain "isn't to push religion. We're Catholic," she says of her husband and herself, "not Presbyterian, but the point is finding unity, and having a chaplain creates

a wonderful atmosphere." On the question of converting employees, Schneider is clear. "We don't hit anyone over the head with this," he says. "We have Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu employees, and they know that our chaplain can help them locate a member of their faith community. The chaplain is a conduit to assist all our employees."

For those who show interest in Christianity, Curtis is happy to share her love of Christ. After many conversations, one young employee asked her, "How do I know that I'm a Christian?" Eventually, he asked about Curtis's church. "So I told him we were in the midst of a sermon series about *The Da Vinci Code*, and he came with his girlfriend. They wanted to know how to become members," Curtis says. That was a unique situation, though. "The employees all know that I'm a pastor, and where I'm a pastor," says Curtis, "but that my goal isn't to bring people to my church."

Curtis is intentional about bringing her work in the restaurant back to the church. "I've used my work at the restaurant as a sermon illustration," she says. "I said that we as pastors encourage congregants to share their faith at work, and this is how I do it. I tell them that I don't shout Bible verses; I just live life with the kids. I see it as a way for me to reach out to a community that wouldn't normally have contact with the church. It's going where they are, instead of expecting them to come to where I am." ■

Photo: Becci Curtis



Photo: Matt Morgan

Becci Curtis lends a hand during the lunch rush.