

An interview with a

# SHINING STAR!

Imagine Teen and Saint Patrick Warrior Alessia Turner (15) sat down at her computer with her mom Gina Larucci to interview Shining Star Juan Toro, the Chaplain of ArchCare Terence Cardinal Cooke Health Care Center in East Harlem. Born in Quito, Ecuador to a Chilean Mother and Bolivian Father he is now in New York City with his wife and 16 year old daughter Nissi, doing inspirational ministry. See below the complete Shining Star interview!



Alessia Turner (15) and mom Gina Larucci!

**Alessia:** Can you tell us about your family background, where were you born, where are your parents from?

**Juan Toro:** Interesting question for me. I was born in Ecuador. I was born of a Chilean mother and Bolivian father. My brother was born in Bogota. I married a woman from Peru, and we have a 16 year old daughter and she was born in Costa Rica. I spent 20 years doing ministry in Costa Rica. Came home for

Christmas to visit my mom in Virginia, and she was in a nursing home, and not doing very well. I then moved there with my wife and daughter, took her out of the nursing home and we cared for her in our home. While in Virginia, my daughter developed a passion for Musical Theatre and she wanted to be an actress. After my mother passed away, we decided to move to New York City!"



Juan Toro  
"Life is better on the beach" Zoom background :)

**Alessia:** What inspired you to do this work?

**Juan:** What we call "the Call," right? I was living in Alaska, living my dream. I graduated with a degree in electrical engineering. I was working on Global energy with native communities in Alaska. It was my dream job and everything my goals had been set for. One day, the bottom fell out from under me; all passion, all interest, all joy just disappeared from one moment to another. It was just empty. I had put so much into this one passion, this one goal, and then I had nothing. I wasn't married at the time, so that was the only thing that was important. So then I went 'looking.' Read books, took classes, it took a while. Finally, it dawned on me. I went to Church, got involved and one day the minister was giving a message, we were crying, and we were laughing, and filled with the Spirit. I said, "I could do that.' And that was 'the call,' that was the beginning.

Gina: That's Beautiful. Can you tell us what a typical day is like at ArchCare?

Juan: Well, right now it's different than it has been because of the distancing. There are 2 of us here full time on the Pastoral Care team, myself and my boss, Father Alves, he is a Catholic priest from Brazil and he is wonderful. Together we serve about 700 residents. We are doing what we call "Tele-chaplaincy", we get a list, and reach out to our residents via telephone. Which is not ideal. Not everyone has a phone or cellphone in their room. We are doing the best we can to stay connected. They are very isolated, because only nurses, CMA's and cleaning staff are allowed into the rooms of anyone that is COVID positive. In general, they don't want us circulating in the same facility, unless absolutely necessary. My boss, Father Alves, is called in sometimes to give Last Rites. We are not visiting face to face. We are also reaching out to the friends and family and offering support. No one is allowed to come visit them, sometimes getting a call letting them know that their loved one is doing fine and offering prayer, is consoling.

Alessia: Can they facetime on their phones?

Juan: Some do, but not all. We have iPads on tripods on wheels, that we bring into their rooms so they have some connection time.

Alessia: What would you say is the hardest part of your job?

Juan: The goal of chaplaincy is to make a connection, but not just any connection. Our residents, without exception, are living in some kind of difficult situation, let's use spiritual language, they are living some kind of Hell. They all would prefer to be somewhere else. And if you ever go to a place that you don't really want to be, that's just the beginning, then you compound that with their ailments and their problems and issues. Chaplaincy is about meeting them where they may be. We need to be willing to connect with them at their point of Hell. And if we can do that by connecting our own hell experience to theirs, they feel that there is someone that understands where they may be. When that connection happens, they don't feel alone. If you can establish the trust and know that someone is with you, then there is the possibility of offering a ray of hope and light in the darkness. The hardest part of Chaplaincy is establishing that connection. That you understand them and can walk with them a little ways in their Hell. We are a long term facility and get to see them more than once. Which is a great benefit because you have the opportunity for a repeat visit, but sometimes you only get one shot, so you do the best that you can. Depends on the resident and how open they may be, if they have done any spiritual work in the past. Go as deep as you can, and as quick as you can and hope we make that connection.

Gina: Connection is something that the teens focus on when serving those in need and homeless and can certainly relate to you in some capacity. Our "Image-Inn' dinners that they prepare for CAMBA at Ascension Church, gives them the opportunity to make these connections, and is powerful.

Juan: The Blessing is that you think that you are here to serve, but they are really serving you. The soul of these people is so mighty and they are overcoming so much. Oftentimes we ask them what do you want to pray for, they may be sick, or homeless, and so many times, they want to pray for someone else, yet they are the ones with the affliction, but are thinking about someone else. It's so noble and beautiful.

Alessia: As a Chaplain, what spiritual insights have you gained from working with these residents and being especially connected to the sick and ailing.

Juan: Chaplaincy has been one of the greatest gifts. I was ordained in 1991 as a Protestant minister. I did ministry for many years. Chaplaincy is unique in that it forces you to really go within yourself and find those places that oftentimes you don't want to go to. Past hurts, and pains and darkneses, wounds, depressions and all of that and make your peace with it. Because if you can make your peace with that, you can be at that connecting level that I was speaking about earlier. That exploration just deepens the experience of wholeness and who we are. We are children of God, but in that expression there are many things that we are not happy about, issues with worthiness, guilt, shame and all of those issues and Chaplaincy helps to confront and harmonize them to the best of your ability. And to be able to go there easily so that someone else can understand that they are not alone in whatever darkness they may be experiencing.

Gina: How do you recharge, regenerate, and de-stress from your daily work? I'm sure prayer and mediation, anything else?

Juan: Great question because chaplaincy and ministry, statistically, have a high level of burn-out. That's because many of us experience what they call "Compassion fatigue," which is where you give and you give and your emotional gas tank points to empty. If you don't take care of that gas tank internally, you will burn out. You have to learn that self-care is really important. And at these times, it's difficult because the news is everywhere, you go out onto the street, talk to a friend, and you always hear about the bad things. This is the time to really heighten your spiritual connection, your practice, your prayer. You can't let yourself descend into anxiety and stress, because it will eat you alive. What's happened for me is that I have had to magnify my practice, doing it at home together and on my own. Doing everything I know how to do. The train has become my temple where I do my prayer and meditation and I sit here at my desk and put on some calming music so that I stay calm and centered. I use everything from the tool box that I have to help myself. Stay centered and present.

Alessia: What is your go-to music?

Juan: Have you heard of Binaural music? You can go to 528 Hz on youtube. We are a vibration of beats and they say that these certain frequencies help lift you up and promote positivity. I just play it as my background music throughout my day. In the bible we see that more than once, people asked Jesus for help and he turned his back on them and went to the desert to pray. He just couldn't take it anymore. He needed to regenerate himself, and that is a lesson for all of us. It's really important, unplug, take some time, look out the window, have some coffee, take a walk-whatever you need to do for yourself. I put together a playlist for myself called Purelife, and I walk down the street, and I'm singing, I have to keep myself up.

Alessia: What lessons have the residents taught you?

Juan: I can think of 3. Those inner darkneses and issues that we don't deal with and we are cognitively

aware and have enough energy to face them when we get older, they will just come out. Anything that is unresolved, unforgiven, unsaid, undone, will show itself sooner or later. I see many people that have kept resentments over the years and it's a terrible experience for them. It's a real motivation to do your work. I've learned that there is no limit to the human spirit. I've seen people face situations that personally, I don't think I can take; to homelessness, to drug addiction to HIV. The situations they describe are so and yet, they are there and they smile and they laugh and they are still alive. They can see their way through and they see hope. It is absolutely amazing. The lesson for me is that with God, all things are possible. The third thing would be the power of forgiveness. Through their interactions, they are willing to go through a forgiveness process for themselves. Self forgiveness, forgiveness of others is so powerful. It brings about healing. You can just feel it and see it and it is absolutely amazing.

Alessia: Our focus on this newsletter is inspired by the quote "The world came together as the people stayed apart." With this in mind, what type of support have you seen from the ArchCare community during this difficult time?

Juan: I have to say that "The Imagine Society" has truly been an inspiration to me.

*Juan hold up copies of the quotes, pictures and newsletter on his desk*

Juan: As a matter of fact, ArchCare launched a social media campaign where they want us to use the #togetherwecan hashtag to give and send messages to everyone: care members, employees and residents. I contacted our marketing department and told them about the Imagine Society's #messagesoflove. When we have pastoral care meetings, we ask the question, "What can our volunteers do to help us?" - we do have a number of volunteers. And here you show up and tell us here is what The Imagine Society can do and will it work for you? That is a coming together that is so beautiful and meaningful. And then, the masks that the Imagine Society offered, it's just a gift and incredible. **I don't like to use the word 'social distancing' because it's really "physical distancing.'** **Socially we have to be connected**, like we are doing now. We are not in the same room, but we are connecting. Using technology has been awesome and I've seen a tremendous coming together. We are all experiencing the same things. It's a unifying experience for humanity. It is calling us to work on focus. For me that's the lesson of this time. On what you value, what's important. It's the spiritual, God connection. The One presence, the One power that we are all a part of. Ultimately, it can be a gift.

Alessia: While we are in Quarantine, how do you think people can further strengthen our connections to one another? Friends, family, community?

Juan: I will speak for myself. We are all creatures of habit. Some of us are introverts, some extroverts. Some appreciate the idea of isolation and quiet. But I think it's really important to make the effort to reach out. Social connection is so important. There has to be conscious effort. Take valuable relationships and nurture them during this time of physical separation. Even what we are doing right now, I had no idea that you were going to suggest a zoom interview, but boy, it really worked.

Gina: Final question, if you could make a “reasonable wish” to help get through this crisis, what would it be?

Juan: My daily effort is to take whatever wish, anxiety, fear, worry, and acknowledge it, feel it, and ultimately surrender. My wish is that I could be more efficient, that I could do it faster, better, quicker. That I could be conscious of catching that emotion and turning it over, rather than holding on.

Also, I’m hearing that the air is cleaner, the water is more pure, that the animals are having a great time. Those things that we have been praying for as far as environmental health. We can see that, in a short amount of time, something fantastic is happening to the planet. I hope we can see how effective we can be when get together and really want to do something. That it is possible and the planet will respond just like our body will respond to our healing intentions. I hope we can learn that lesson so that we can take on these global issues that seem so gargantuan. When you look at this, and we’ve only been dealing with this a couple of months? Already the Planet is coming back. It’s amazing. It’s a testimony of what is possible.

As far as ArchCare, I’m in awe of all the people that come to work here. Particularly, the nurses and the doctors, and the cleaning staff that go into these rooms and do the best with their protection. They are warriors. Keeping a good attitude, showing up day in and day out. Honoring their shift and serving these people with such a high consciousness. It’s a testament of the true heroes that they are. We’ve seen it in the media, but all these people are the true heroes of our times.

Gina: Hard not to get emotional as we speak about the courage and heart of these heroes, and see the greatness.

Juan: Exactly. New York is famous for being so grubby, but my experience in the street is that everyone is respectful, and honoring this thing and cooperating. It’s fantastic.

Alessia: It was amazing to meet you, thank you for your time.

Juan: I’m thankful for this opportunity and look forward to nurturing our relationship with The Imagine Society.

By the way, I loved your newsletter, printed it and took it home to show my teenage daughter, it was wonderful!

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