

## Getting to Know...Deland S.M. Whitson

Written by: Vic Gideon

He's the most successful recruiter for the council, according to his Knights of Columbus brothers, talking about Deland S.M. Whitson's efforts to bring new members to Windermere Council 2726, the number of men he's recruited now numbers more than twenty. His passion for bringing in new Knights is consistent with living his Catholic faith and mission.

"I believe that Catholic men should be involved with Catholic organizations," Deland explains. "It has always been my mission to recruit Catholic men to join Knights of Columbus because it's a Catholic family, service-oriented organization."

He's been a recognizable force at St. Philomena's Church for more than sixty years, standing well over six feet tall on the altar almost every Sunday for ten o'clock Mass as well as at funerals and weddings, the gentle giant participating as an altar server and acolyte.

He is a fine example of a faithful, Catholic gentleman, according to Communion of Saints pastor, Father Anthony Marshall. His parents married in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in 1956, his mother, Claudine, native to the Caribbean nation, his father, Sherman, from Alabama, his mother a practicing Catholic and his father, a non-Catholic who still participated in the church.

The couple moved to the U.S. and Deland was baptized at St. Aloysius in the Glenville neighborhood before his family moved to East 129th in 1961 on the Cleveland/East Cleveland border. After that, Deland became a staple at St. Philomena, receiving First Communion, attending grade school, and getting inspiration from Monsignor William O'Donnell, who served at St. Philomena from 1961 until May 1982, when he died at age eighty.

"I gradually got involved with just about everything church-wise," Deland proudly relates. "I've served every pastor that has come through St. Philomena."

His inspiration to get involved with the Knights started when he received a congratulatory note after graduation from Glenville in 1975.

He joined the Holy Name Society in 1977, then became a Knight in 1982, receiving his third degree in 1983, and fourth in 1987. He then became one of only three people in the Diocese to become a fourth-degree member of the Knights of Columbus and also a member of the Knights of Peter Claver, an organization founded in 1909, the largest and oldest Black Catholic lay-led organization in the United States, dedicated to serving the Black community.

A Knight for 44 years, a former Grand Knight of the Windermere Council, and active in the Color Corps, Deland is the council historian and was inducted to Windermere Hall of Achievement for lifetime service in 2024. He attended 10th National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis in 2024 with Cleveland Diocese delegation and he also volunteers at Ozanam Center.

"It gives the chance to be involved, he says of his work for St. Philomena and the Knights. You act like a participant instead of an observer."

Deland, who never married, has three younger sisters: Desiree, the oldest who lives in Warrensville Heights, Celeste, who lives in Detroit, and Arlana, a member of St. Dominic who lives in South Euclid, as well as eight nieces and nephews and four grand nephews. Sadly, the family lost Sherman in 1991 and Claudine in 2011.

Since he doesn't drive, Deland walked to St. Philomena before moving to an assisted living facility in Richmond Heights in December after medical problems starting in June and surgery last year. He now takes RTA Paratransit to get to Mass and events. But despite the new challenges, including using a walker, Deland still rarely misses a Mass, an event, or a volunteer opportunity.

"I pride myself in being Catholic," Deland says. "My life is full of service."

