

Reflections on “I Choose Peace”

By: Keith Donovan

“I Choose Peace.” These words have sat with me since reading them several weeks ago as this year’s theme for the International Lasallian Days for Peace. In a time of civil unrest, economic uncertainty, and a global health crisis, what does it mean to be a person of faith committed to the Lasallian charism and to “choose peace”? Serving as director at the Br. David Darst Center in Chicago, I did not have to look far for a role model, and I felt compelled to share some of his story.

James McGinnis Darst was born December 6, 1941. Having attended Christian Brothers High School in Memphis, he came to know the Brothers and felt the call to become a Brother himself. Jim entered the Novitiate in 1959, taking the religious habit and receiving his religious name, Brother David, on August 30, 1959. His further studies at Saint Mary’s College (now Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota) prepared him to enter the classroom as a teacher.

Outside of the classroom, David was known as an avid reader and writer, with particular interests in the morality of war. His father had served in the army during Pearl Harbor, and David began to feel called to take action against the injustices he saw playing out during the Vietnam War. Two days short of his 26th birthday, he returned his draft card to the local selective service office in an act of civil disobedience. Though he could have been exempt as a religious, he opted to formally declare himself a “conscientious objector.” This status was not recognized by the government, though, and he was later drafted and refused induction, sentenced to serve time in jail for his actions.



David joined others opposed to the Vietnam War in a group later called the Catonsville Nine. The nine broke into a selective service office in Catonsville, Maryland, stole several hundred draft cards, took them outside, and set them on fire using homemade napalm, a substance chosen symbolically to match the napalm being used by the U.S. government to burn villages and in some instances people during the Vietnam War.

David died in his pursuit of peace and justice. At the age of 28 on the way back from a protest, David died in a car accident along with two other Christian Brothers. Wanting to live in a world at peace, David chose to work for justice. Believing that human dignity was more important than physical property, David gave his very life working for justice, calling us to do this work as well.

So today, as violence, chaos, and uncertainty are all around us, what is your faith calling you to do? What does our shared charism teach us about community, service, and justice? How do we work toward a world at peace? Are we willing to be actively engaged in this pursuit and choose, each day, to dismantle the systems that keep us all from living in peace? Are we willing to use our power, our imagination, and the energy of the Spirit to create, together and by association, systems which sustain liberty and justice for all? For me, answering these questions is what it means to “choose peace...” and might someone who has gone before me help me in that effort.

Brother David Darst... Pray for us.

Keith Donovan has served as the Executive Director of the Br. David Darst Center, a social justice retreat and education center in Chicago, since 2016.