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Not Just Mortar
Holds Together
Church's Stones

By DOUGLAS MARTIN

Eddie Pizzaro grew up poor in Spanish Harlem. His father abused drugs, went to jail every so often and beat his precious mother in front of him. Out on the ragged streets, friend after friend seemed to fall inexorably into similar dismal traps.

Amazingly, Eddie did not. "While everybody was in trouble, I was trying to build things," he explained.

Build things. The other morning, Mr. Pizzaro, now 29 years old, strolled through the world's second-largest church, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, at 112th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, and pointed out things he had built. The round-cheeked high-school dropout paused at Poets' Corner to gaze at black slate stones he had cut in honor of Henry James and Emily Dickinson. (Each took two days' work.) He then indicated a time capsule in which he had scampishly ensconced his own name. In the adjacent stone yard, which he manages, Mr. Pizzaro pointed to a continuing project, a bust of Nelson Mandela.

This direct-speaking Puerto Rican with the giant smile regards all those as lesser works. His most important creations are human — the neighborhood needy to whom he teaches the ancient stonemasonry skills that can add up to a ticket to a better life. His is an exquisite lesson: "We're not all perfect, but we can do something perfect."

Nothing is more transcendent than a cathedral, those awesome holy books writ of stone and glass sprinkled magically about this sorry planet like answered prayers. Generations are born and generations die before many cathedrals are finished.

People look so small in cathedrals.

The Cathedral of St. John the Divine began to rise more than a century ago. But construction ground to a halt for World War II because the armed forces needed iron and steel. Then the Episcopal Church was reluctant to resume work on a grand structure in such a poor neighbor-

The church found a novel way out of the conundrum by deciding to hire unemployed young residents of Morningside Heights, Harlem and Newark and teach them the dying trade of stonework. Master artisans were summoned from England. The venture has become so successful that it employs more than 60 people and has recently begun taking on outside work — some as far afield as a restoration of the Iowa State Capitol — and plowing profits back into the cathedral.

Not surprisingly, many recruits to the demanding craft fell by the wayside. But others are doing work that has won praise even from European experts. "We're trying to build people as well as revive the craft," said Alan Bird, a third-generation carver from England. "The stone is the binding."

Mr. Pizzaro is a huge success story. He worked four years as an apprentice before winning the title of journeyman. A few years later he became a supervisor and was recently appointed stone-yard manager. In this role, how important is Mr. Pizzaro to the cathedral's construction?

"Eddie is this whole enterprise," Mr. Bird said.

Eddie Pizzaro grew up building things. Often working in abandoned buildings, he built scooters, go-carts and, he figures, as many as 30 bicycles from scratch. What intrigued him were numbers and dimensions. He said he was called "master of the ruler" by schoolmates.

Despite excelling at mathematics, Mr. Pizzaro dropped out of school in the 11th grade. He says it was the only way his sister and two brothers could remain in school. His mother was already stretched to the limit, working in a hat factory downtown and cooking nights in an uptown restaurant.

Mr. Pizzaro found a job restoring abandoned buildings. About that time, he went to the cathedral for his brother's graduation from junior high school. The gargoyles captivated him, and he could not help scratching one to see whether it was made of plaster. (Hardly.) He began applying for a job, ultimately being hired to operate a 52-inch saw.

Mr. Pizzaro threw himself into the 10-hour days he still works. And he learned things. For example, when you look at a massive hunk of Indiana sandstone you must visualize the completed form before making the smallest cut. And the artisan's attitude is everything. "If you feel bad, your stone looks bad," he said.

The difficulty of the task is increased by problems some employees arrive with, like drugs. And the job can seem downright eternal. After a decade, one tower comprises 4,000 stones of a planned 11,000. The other has not begun.

In the background, a chiseler chipped methodically. Mr. Pizzaro acknowledged that he would never see the finished cathedral. "My goal is to see the towers," he said.



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Eddie Pizzaro

hood for fear they might appear insensitive to the needy.