

Inner-city miracle 'safe and learning'

Anonymous donors behind the revival of Memphis' Catholic schools are not ready to declare victory

By David Waters

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As they walk into school each morning, Nicole Taylor's sons, Markeith and Derick, walk by a life-size, wooden and plaster crucifix hanging on the wall. The arms are missing. Officials found the armless statue in the attic 10 years ago as they were preparing to reopen Holy Names Catholic School in North Memphis.

Dr. Mary McDonald, Catholic Schools superintendent, told the staff to put the broken crucifix on the wall with this sign: "We are the arms of Christ in the world."

Taylor isn't Catholic, but living in a rough neighborhood that surrounds her children with fistfuls of trouble, she is thankful she can send them into the protective arms of Jesus.

"Before, when they went to the city school, they'd come home and say, 'Mama, every time I come around the corner, someone does this,'" Taylor said, showing a fist. "Now I don't have to worry about them getting jumped or stuff taken. They're safe and they're learning. If this school wasn't here, I think I would move to Minnesota."

This school is here, along with six other, once-shuttered inner-city Catholic schools and one new one -- dubbed Jubilee Schools -- thanks to a multimillion-dollar donation made in 1999. The donors, both Protestants, chose to remain anonymous. In their dealings with Memphis Catholic schools, they have spoken only to McDonald and Bishop J. Terry Steib, both of whom agreed never to divulge their identities.

Now, for the first time, they have agreed to discuss their donation publicly. But the two Memphis

businessmen still want to maintain their anonymity, so they would only agree to respond to questions e-mailed to them via McDonald.

In their responses, the two donors explain why they chose to give the money to reopen inner-city Catholic schools, how they hope the donation will help Memphis and its public schools, and why they wish to remain anonymous after all these years.

"If these schools were a monument to certain adult benefactors," the donors wrote, "they'd be far less effective than when they are properly viewed as belonging to each individual church and neighborhood. It is about the children, not the benefactors."

"We wanted all contributors -- other donors, teachers, staff -- to feel a sense of ownership. We wanted support from the Memphis community at large, as well as national support. This may be a local initiative, but it's an asset of national quality that merits funding from anyone."

Funding has flowed from every direction, even overseas. Since the donors' initial \$12 million contribution (\$2 million for each of the original six reopened schools), individual, corporate and nonprofit donors have given \$60 million to support Jubilee Schools. That includes large grants from the Assisi Foundation, the Hyde Foundation and the Poplar Foundation.

The Jubilee Schools now operate on a \$30 million endowment, serving more than 1,400 mostly non-Catholic and poor students at eight schools (fundraising allowed the addition of two more). Unlike most private, faith-based schools, these schools accept any students, regardless of test scores, previous academic or behavior records, or a family's ability to pay.

Nearly all of the students receive tuition support from the Blue Streak Scholarship Fund. All families pay something, but some pay as little as \$10 a month. Students who graduate from the elementary schools receive scholarships to attend Catholic middle and high schools.

The schools also provide all students who need them with uniforms, daily hot breakfasts and lunches, weekend snack packs, Thanksgiving and Christmas food baskets, health screenings, and tutoring, as well as parenting workshops, and literacy and jobs skill programs.

"I tell the story of the Memphis schools to as many people as I can," said Dr. Karen Ristau, president of the National Catholic Education Association. "Outside Memphis, I can count on one hand the number of closed Catholic schools that have been reopened. What is happening in Memphis isn't happening anywhere else."

What was happening in Memphis in the 1970s and 1980s was happening in Catholic dioceses all across the country. Catholics were moving away from inner-city parishes and their schools.

By 1980, the Memphis diocese had closed or consolidated a half-dozen inner-city Catholic schools, citing shifting demographics, declining enrollments and rising expenses. More were in jeopardy.

"Either we take some steps to come away from crisis and develop a sound financial basis," Brother Bonaventure Scully, Catholic superintendent, told Catholic educators here in 1984, "or by the year 2000 we are only going to have schools in areas that can support them, somewhat affluent areas."

During the next decade, the news didn't get any better as the diocese closed one inner-city school after another -- St. Joseph and Little Flower in 1985, St. John the Evangelist in 1990, Blessed Sacrament in 1991, and, finally, St. Augustine in 1995.

As the year 2000 approached -- the year Pope John Paul II was declaring the Great Jubilee -- Memphis Bishop J. Terry Steib asked McDonald, his new 53-year-old superintendent, to find a way to keep the diocese from becoming a suburban-only school system.

"When I became bishop in 1993, I was shocked to see that our schools were closing," Steib told a reporter years later. "I thought, that's not the Church's way. Catholic schools are meant to make a difference in people's lives . . . It is the mission of the Church to be places where others aren't."

McDonald, a white woman raised in Philadelphia's Catholic schools, was an unlikely candidate to counter decades of middle-class flight, urban renewal, suburban sprawl, industrial abandonment, drugs, crime and poverty that had depleted urban parishes of Memphis.

All of her two decades of Catholic schools experience in Memphis had been spent in more affluent parts of town -- as a teacher at Holy Rosary, as a teacher and principal at St. Agnes Academy, both in East Memphis, and as principal at St. Benedict at Auburndale in Cordova.

"When I left the bishop's office, I was angry and overwhelmed," she said. "I felt like I had just left my dream job at St. Benedict for something I couldn't do, something that couldn't be done. We had just closed all of these schools. We had no money. I felt a sense of hopelessness."

Neither Steib nor McDonald had a plan, but others did. As McDonald made her way across the community talking about the value of Catholic education to any civic or church group that would listen, two men -- both Protestants -- were quietly watching and listening.

"Our research on her was thorough," the donors said in their e-mail.

"We had very close friends and associates who knew her incredibly well, both personally and professionally. Her record heading St. Agnes was very easy to study. All interviews concerning her heart and her abilities were supremely positive.

"Without a new superintendent, and a Bishop who supports Catholic education, we wouldn't have made the investment, since the two predecessors had been the ones to make the decision to close the same schools."

While McDonald was looking for a way to save Catholic education in Memphis, the Roman Catholic Church, on the threshold of its Third Millennium, was preparing to celebrate the Year of Jubilee in 2000.

"The century and the millennium now beginning will need to see, and hopefully with still greater clarity, to what length of dedication the Christian community can go in charity towards the poorest," Pope John Paul II said in 1998. "There is a special presence of Christ in the poor, and this requires the Church to make a preferential option for them."

As McDonald drove by abandoned school buildings in Memphis neighborhoods filled with children, she thought about how the Church had failed to exercise that option.

"When we closed those schools, we left more than buildings behind. We left children, and those children need us now more than ever," she told any civic or church group that would listen.

The anonymous investors were also looking for a way to support children left behind. They looked at the empty Catholic school buildings as resources that could become beacons of hope with infusions of capital and strong leadership. The more they heard about McDonald, the more they began to think they had found the faith-based program they were looking for:

"The historic mission and excellence of the Catholic school system," the donors explained in their e-mail. "In this particular city," they explained, "education seemed to be the most important way to serve, and to bring justice and equality. But education alone didn't seem to be adequate to make people whole. There also seemed to be the need for education in character development."

On May 21, 1999, one of the donors called McDonald and asked if he could come by her office. At the meeting, he asked her about Catholic education, the schools that were open and the schools that had been closed. She told him about her dream of reopening one of the schools that had been closed. He expressed interest in helping but made no commitments.

Later that day, he called back and asked McDonald to come to his office to meet with both men. At that meeting, they asked her what it would take to reopen one of the schools. How much would she need? She went back to her office and crunched the numbers, then she returned with a business plan that would cost \$2 million. They handed her a check for \$1 million and called it earnest money.

They met again with McDonald the next day. That's when they asked her how many more closed schools could be reopened. Five, she said, including Holy Names, which was closed in 1969.

"They said, 'Well, why don't you open them all?'" McDonald recalls. "I was overwhelmed and overjoyed."

The two men agreed to donate \$11 million more -- seed money to reopen six schools at \$2 million per school.

"Real estate was already in place," the donors explained in their e-mail. "St. Augustine and other schools which had been shut down were terrific physically, and located perfectly in the underserved areas which needed this service the most. Perfect location and very small incremental cost to reopen.

"Dr. McDonald had the ability to recruit excellent teachers for this mission . . . Not only did most of these teachers work for missional salaries, but the fact that many came

from out of town was a huge plus because from day one none of us wanted to raid great teachers from Memphis City Schools, a system which needed great teachers even more than Jubilee.

"We felt that this would be scalable enough to become very large over the ensuing decade(s). That in turn would hopefully someday approach a 'tipping point' that would help spur the Memphis City Schools into better performance. MCS is the main act in our city, and we hoped that Jubilee would (and will) positively impact it through positive factors like information sharing but also through competition."

Despite the growth and success of Jubilee Schools, neither McDonald nor the anonymous donors are satisfied.

"When we began Jubilee Schools, we thought we were just going to be reopening Catholic schools that had closed in the inner city in Memphis," McDonald said.

"But what we found out was that we were really going to be serving a population in poverty. The needs are greater than I ever imagined. We're doing all we can, but we need to be doing more."

The donors agree. In their e-mail, they wrote that they are "totally positive about the Jubilee Schools and Dr. McDonald -- grateful, happy and lucky to be involved. However, we are not satisfied.

"We will not be satisfied (nor will Dr. McDonald) until we're serving thousands more kids and every one of them is succeeding, prepared to go to college, and happy. So we're a long way from declaring victory."

At Holy Names, Nicole Taylor counts it a victory every day that her third- and eighth-grade sons go to school and come home safe and happy.

"I have my little shell and I try to keep them in it when they're with me," Taylor said. "I don't let them play outside or ride their bikes unless I'm with them. I keep them away from the drug dealers and the prostitutes.

"Most of these children in this neighborhood just need a big old hug. That's what my boys get every time they walk in that school."



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