

## Reading, Writing, Rebirth

Jubilee Schools celebrate return of Catholic schools to inner city

By Aisling Maki

When Bishop Terry Steib 13 years ago asked Dr. [Mary McDonald](#) to come on board as superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Diocese of Memphis, he did so with a uniquely challenging task in mind.

McDonald was asked to lead a project that would breathe life back into Memphis' inner-city Catholic elementary schools, which had become empty shells over the years as the city's Catholic population shifted to the suburbs, abandoning urban parishes and leaving them financially unable to operate their schools.

"That happened all over the country, not just here in Memphis," McDonald said. "In fact, it's still happening all over the country; the inner-city Catholic schools are closing. We talked about the fact that we should be there. We wanted to bring Catholic education back to the inner city. All of those schools at one time had been filled with children."

2000 was a Jubilee year, which in church tradition is a year focused on mercy for the poor. The 1999-2000 school year saw the birth – or rebirth – of the Jubilee Schools, which would give inner-city children a fresh start, affording them the opportunity to succeed regardless of socioeconomic status.

"Educating children who've been written off by their neighborhoods or their society is a goal of ours," McDonald said. "We know they can learn; they just need an opportunity, maybe for a different learning environment."

MacDonald set out to raise funds, which would come exclusively from donations by foundations, corporations, private groups and individuals.

"I just didn't have time to stop and think that it wouldn't work," she said. "In my mind, it was going to work. I believed that it was the right thing to do and the money would follow. I don't worry about it anymore because I just know that this is bigger than us. This really is God's plan."

The rejuvenated schools would be self-sustaining, operating without assistance from the diocese. With Catholics making up just 5 percent of Memphis' population, McDonald said the diocese could not provide the resources to operate the schools.

"This required the partnership of people who could support us in many ways, financially and with their time, talent and volunteerism," she said. "This really has been the work of many



**Teacher Alice Grant leads third and fourth graders in a grammar chant at Holy Names - Jesus and Mary School. The school is one of eight Jubilee schools in the Catholic Diocese of Memphis.**

(Photo: Lance Murphey)

people in the community. It does take the commitment and dedication of many people to lift many children out of poverty.”

The first Jubilee school opened in 1999, and today there are eight: De La Salle; Holy Names; St. Therese the Little Flower; St. Augustine; St. John; St. Joseph; St. Patrick; and Resurrection. All are in neighborhoods hard hit by poverty and other challenges.

“A lot of our students’ homes are very unstable,” said [Kristi Baird](#), principal of [St. John Elementary, 2718 Lamar Ave.](#) “Some of our children don’t even have homes; they may be staying in one relative’s house one week and another relative’s house the next. They really look at St. John as a stable, loving environment. A lot of the children eat their breakfast and lunch at St. John’s, and those may be the only meals they have for that day. We meet the whole spectrum of the children’s needs: physical, educational, spiritual, emotional and social.”

It comes as no surprise that in the city ranked as having the highest rates of hunger in the nation, hunger would be a major issue facing the Jubilee Schools. On Fridays, students are sent home with non-perishable food in their backpacks to ensure they don’t go hungry over the weekend.

Sometimes students come to school wearing dirty clothes, and the schools have a washer and dryer to ensure they have clean uniforms. Jubilee staff members comb children’s hair. They address their health and dental needs.

The schools, which educate 1,500 children and growing, also offer parents job placement and training, and even hire them to work in the schools.

“We try to help the entire families because we don’t want to send the children back to the same environment without some intervention,” McDonald said. “We’re bridging the divide of poverty with hope, and the divide of ignorance with education.”

McDonald said the success stories are many, with students moving on to competitive Catholic middle and high schools. The inaugural group of Jubilee children has gone on to college, and many have received full scholarships.

“Knowing the poverty in which these children live, and seeing the results – seeing them happy, learning and achieving way beyond what their neighborhoods said they would – that’s the real story,” Baird said.

Few of the students served are Catholic.

“We don’t teach these children because they’re Catholic; we teach them because we’re Catholic and that’s a mission of our church,” McDonald said. “Whether the children are



**Superintendent Dr. Mary MacDonald speaks with third grader Madison Barksdale at Holy Names - Jesus and Mary School.**

(Photo: Lance Murphey)

Catholic is not the issue. The issue is whether they need us. Our church has always been with those people who are poor and disenfranchised.”

McDonald said she hopes the children will decide to stay in Memphis and use their knowledge to better their neighborhoods of origin. She also said she doesn't know of any other initiative in the country like the Jubilee Schools, and she's been invited to speak in other cities interested in replicating the model.

Blue Streak Scholarship Foundation, an inter-denominational, volunteer fundraising organization dedicated to supporting the schools, will host its biggest fundraiser on April 29 at the Pink Palace Museum.

A Taste of Jubilee will feature cuisines from local restaurants, live music, a silent auction and more.

Last year's event generated more than \$56,000, which was matched by the Hyde Family Foundation for a total of \$112,000.