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Making the grade in Memphis

Patrick McCloskey, Nov 10, 2009

Catholic schools achieved the greatest social transformation in American history, pulling impoverished Irish immigrants out of the underclass and into the working and middle classes, writes Patrick McCloskey, author of "The Street Stops Here" – an account of a year in the life of a Catholic School in Harlem. These schools now provide a lifeline for disadvantaged, non-Catholic minorities in urban America, boosting graduation and college acceptance rates, and outperforming many equivalent public schools. But they are also disappearing from the very neighborhoods that need them most. McCloskey reports on how one diocese has bucked the trend, what it means to one family, and what it could mean for America.

In early July, Shirley McKay sat in the principal's office at St. John's Elementary School, six miles from Graceland, in Memphis, Tennessee. She was there to discuss her three grandchildren, which she struggles to raise alone, and she smiled broadly when she described her grandson's aspiration to become a lawyer. As a teenager, McKay, who is black, had marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. shortly before his assassination 40 years ago; and now, with the first African American president who started his career as a lawyer, everything seemed possible. At St. John's, hope is more tangible than distant history or even a living symbol. The school offers more than feel-good nostrums to the mostly non-Catholic African American children who come from some of the poorest, most crime-ridden neighborhoods in the country: St. John's offers children a real opportunity to finish high school and earn college acceptance. This is an opportunity the vast majority of disadvantaged minority students here in racially divided Memphis don't get.



McKay's grandson, Jason, a seventh-grader in the fall, and two granddaughters, Jannaria, soon a fourth-grader, and Jamya, a third-grader-to-be used to live full-time with their mother, Latanya Williams, and two other single mothers and all their children. "There was almost no adult supervision and a dozen kids," McKay later said. "Janarria hunted through the house for what her sister needed and still takes care of her."

Throughout pre-school and kindergarten, Janarria acted out in class, until the father, McKay's son, who is also named Jason, won custody. She perceived her classmates as rivals competing for scarce resources and as potential bullies who might pick on Jamya, even though she's two inches taller than her elder sister. Janarria's exuberance turned to aggression towards peers and defiance towards teachers.

McKay sat often with Teddi Niedzwiedz, who is in her sixth year as St. John's principal and twentieth as an educator, strategizing how to "smooth the girls' rough edges," Niedzwiedz later said. Jamya tended to get into trouble too, but less so. St. John's teachers would call McKay, whenever behavior became troublesome, and the calm interaction of school and grandparent tempered the youngsters. They were then living with their father, who had turned his life around, and found full-time employment at a local warehouse.

But then three years ago, Jason Sr. was shot to death in his driveway during lunch break by a masked gunman, who has yet to be apprehended. Williams, who has two other children from another man

who'd also been murdered, "was too overwhelmed," said McKay. "And without an education, she can't get a decent job." So McKay successfully sought custody and decided to keep her grandchildren in Catholic school. Janarria took the death of her father badly. She regressed into anti-social behavior, as did her siblings. In response, the children were counseled on conflict resolution and processing tragedy emotionally.

Even Jason lashed out at a classmate, angry at his father's loss not only at home but at school. His father coached the basketball team and Jason, although shorter and slighter than teammates, was the star player. Niedzwiedz talked with Jason after the fight saying, "St. John's is a special place where we don't accept hostility." The principal could have expelled the boy but has never exercised that option. Instead she makes consequences clear then lets her cheery Southern drawl and personal warmth nudge students towards compliance.

"Now Jason's the class peacemaker," said Niedzwiedz. A week after Obama's victory, Janarria made the honor roll for the first time with straight A's, equaled by only 15 of St. John's 190 students.

Although McKay is eligible to retire early, she continues working to make full salary and additional income from overtime, which she needs to pay her family's portion of tuition, based on a sliding scale. "I'll work until I fall down dead, if I must, to keep the children in Catholic school," she said.

In Memphis, as across the country, Catholic schools more than double the high school graduation rates for disadvantaged minority students, compared to peers in the public system, to about 90 percent. In addition, over 90 percent of minority Catholic school graduates go on to college, while only half of their public school counterparts pursue post-secondary education. Most studies show that disadvantages minorities outscore their public school peers and remarkably, the more disadvantaged Catholic school students are the better they perform relative to those in the public system. Also, the longer disadvantaged students attend Catholic school, the better they score; in contrast, disadvantaged minorities perform more poorly the longer they stay in the public system.

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