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Opus Dei Tutors Kids in Aquinas and Algebra

by John W. Kennedy

For most of its 30 years, Chicago's Midtown Education Foundation (MEF) has bucked prevailing currents in American culture. When young people in the 1960s began to rage against authority and social norms, Midtown's academic tutoring program emphasized moral decisionmaking. As religious values came under attack as never before, Midtown made faith in God indispensable to its educational message.

Times have changed. Virtues such as discipline, sacrifice, and honesty are coming back in vogue. "This is our moment," says Jim Palos, the executive director. "People are finally realizing the worth of teaching values."

Midtown operates two educational centers for inner-city children from fourth through 12th grade. Through after-school tutoring in academics and workshops in character-building, it aims to save students left behind in a public-school system that sees 42 percent of its high-school students drop out every year. Midtown seeks not only to catch these kids but to propel them toward higher education, productive careers, and responsible adulthood. "We want these kids to be changed, so that in 20 years they'll be faithful, loving spouses and good, reliable employees," Palos says.

Almost all of Midtown's graduates finish high school, and most go on to college. Typical of the center's successes is Ricardo Blasquez, who grew up in a struggling neighborhood in Chicago in the 1960s. Blasquez, who later served as a mentor himself at Midtown, now is the managing director of 10 General Motors plants in Mexico and California. He says MEF staff and volunteers became "like family at a critical time for all of us."

MEF began as an outreach of Members of Opus Dei (Latin for "work of God"), a movement of Catholic laymen determined to integrate their faith with daily work, social activity, and family life. Although all 18 MEF staff members are Catholic, they seek to promote not church doctrine but rather a broad Christian ethic. The foundation's 465 volunteer mentors -- one for each child in the program -- are Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, even agnostic. But they share a common core of moral principles, based on the Bible and on natural law, which they try to transmit to the children.

"Giving character education to children without talking to them about God is like trying to build a house without a foundation," says Patricia Cronin, who developed a character-education curriculum for the program's mentors. "We want children to make moral commitments, not just to please adults or to conform to social customs that evolve out of convenience or pleasure, but to satisfy their own deep needs for order and relatedness."

Targeting average kids

It is not only the most troubled children -- the adolescent pimps, prostitutes, and drug dealers -- who need moral education, Midtown officials argue. They do not seek out such children, and regard other organizations as better suited to handle their rehabilitation. Likewise, gifted students

from strong families can find specialized programs elsewhere.

"We target average kids," Palos says. "They're capable of returning a great deal to society, but often they're a neglected group. If you can have a consistent, comprehensive, and cogent culture, kids can overcome a bad school or home environment."

The 34-year-old Palos speaks from experience. He grew up in a Chicago neighborhood where drive-by shootings occurred regularly. He did not know that a world beyond such lawlessness existed until he enrolled in Midtown as a fifth-grader. "I didn't have any motivation to get good grades and I didn't want to be seen carrying books home from school," Palos recalls. "But then I met these interesting people at Midtown who were excited about learning." Palos enrolled in a Catholic high school, graduated from Columbia University, and became MEF's executive director four years ago.

Although one purpose of MEF is to intervene before a boy is recruited by a gang or a girl becomes pregnant, the program's keystone is stimulating children to pursue education zealously. In Chicago, the odds against that are especially grim. Last year, the Illinois Goal Assessment Program gave statewide exams to its high schoolers; the Windy City was home to 45 of the 50 lowest-scoring schools. In February, Chicago school officials announced that the city was dropping the standardized Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, an admission that the city's public-school students cannot meet national standards.

Midtown encourages parents to send their children to one of about a dozen area schools, most of them parochial, geared toward college preparation. All MEF entrants are viewed as potential college graduates, even though two-thirds are from very low-income homes. Of those enrolled in the program, 95 percent graduate from high school, and 64 percent go on to college.

Admission to the center, which offers programs year-round, is not automatic. MEF gives all its applicants an academic achievement test, and also interviews their parents. "We don't admit a child unless the parent is behind him," Palos says. "We're not here to replace parents." MEF enrolled 1,531 students in 1995, double the number six years ago.

Tuition for most ages is \$100, although the actual per-pupil cost to the foundation is 10 times that amount. Ninety percent of MEF's \$1.1 million budget comes from foundation grants or corporations such as Walgreens and Amoco, and about 3 percent from government sources. Midtown shuns public money for philosophical reasons -- government assistance can undercut religiously motivated programs -- but also on practical grounds: Public funding demands much more paperwork than private sources.

The academic regimen is straightforward. Elementary students attend two-hour classes one evening a week. That includes 60 minutes studying with a volunteer tutor, 15 minutes listening to a talk on values, and 45 minutes in recreational activities. An eight-week summer program offers daily activities. Outside the foundation's buildings on Peoria and Wood streets, the neighborhoods are gritty and foreboding. But the facilities inside are clean and brightly painted. Donated desks and chairs are in good shape. Hundreds of classic paperbacks are on classroom shelves. Students take home *Lord of the Rings*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, and *Where the Red Fern Grows* on the honor system.

Mentors and morality

While 90 percent of Midtown's students are African American or Hispanic, 90 percent of the volunteers are white. Most are successful professionals between 25 and 35, often living in the suburbs. All are determined to build bridges to inner-city kids.

At the boys' facility, many mentors arrive wearing suits and ties because they come directly from work. One evening it's Mike Brisson's turn to give the character-development talk on honesty. He speaks off the cuff, using the Socratic method to get students talking and thinking.

"You might tell one little lie like 'I already did my homework,' but your mom notices your books haven't moved since you came home from school," Brisson says. "Then you say, 'I did it at school.' That's another lie." The boys are listening. "Telling the truth isn't always easy, but if we've done something wrong, it's better to accept the punishment," Brisson continues. "It's a bad habit to be sneaky. We owe the truth to ourselves, God, our parents, and teachers."

Brisson, a computer programmer at a bank, mentors 11-year-old Eddie Calderon. Nowadays he's helping Eddie spend less time in front of the television and more time helping out around the house. Brisson phones Eddie weekly to strengthen the bond.

Amber Burnett, a 15-year-old attending Whitney Young High, one of the few decent public schools in the area, has been in the program for four years. Her goal for the week is to use more positive speech. "I have a habit of gossiping about what people wear," she says.

To the mentors at Midtown -- in line with Catholic ethical teaching -- habits become either virtues or vices. They shape not only characters but ambitions as well.

Amber has decided she wants to become an obstetrician. "She definitely will become a doctor," says her mother, Dorothy Burnett. "Have you seen her grades?" Burnett, a social services clerk at a church, just happens to be carrying a transcript in her pocketbook which shows an "A" in chemistry and a "B" in geometry.

Maricela Patino, a 14-year-old Catholic student, expects to major in engineering at college. Her parents -- dad is a butcher, mom is a school lunch server -- moved to Chicago 17 years ago from Mexico. According to Patricia Patino, Maricela's mother, MEF has been a godsend. "When I told her to help with the chores she wouldn't," she explains. She surreptitiously talked to the girl's counselor, who made subtle suggestions that took root. "Now, Maricela says, 'Mother, do you need help with something?'"

The Midtown program's basic approach -- Biblically based character development, taught by role models, and imbedded in an academic curriculum -- seems to be working. It clearly is in demand: Annual enrollment at MEF has increased by more than 13 percent every year over the last decade. But the Midtown program is no quick fix for delinquent youth. The best results, officials say, come from students who attend the program year after year. "Character isn't built in a couple of weeks," Palos says. "It takes time to break habits."

For more information, contact MEF, 718 S. Loomis St., Chicago, Ill. 60607. Tel.: 312-738-8300.

John W. Kennedy is the associate news editor of Christianity Today magazine.

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21 Dupont Circle NW, Suite 310, Washington, DC 20036 202.466.6730 FAX: 202.466.6733