

Helping to Educate the Whole Person

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Director of the Metro Achievement Center, Chicago. She graduated at Georgetown University with a Bachelor's degree in Economics and Spanish; she did post-graduate studies in the philosophy of education in Rome and she completed her Masters in Business Administration at Iona College in New York. She then worked in Milwaukee where she launched and directed REACH for eight years, a tutoring program modeled after Chicago's Metro Achievement Center.

The Metro Achievement Center for Girls and the Midtown Center for Boys have the same basic structure—programs for 9-18 year olds that offer academic, character, cultural and spiritual enrichment. Blessed Josemaría's concern for helping souls — one at a time — permeates the Midtown and Metro programs to such an extent that our program for younger students bears the name, 'One-on-One'.

At the heart of our programs is the respect for the dignity of the human person. The premium placed on human dignity is the bedrock of Catholic social thought and the foundation of our character education curriculum. The respect and concern for each child, parent and volunteer emulates Blessed Josemaría's conviction that "each soul is worth the blood of Christ"¹.

Over a year's time more than 500 volunteers work with 1,000 children in our centers. We also have a parent program because we firmly believe that parents are the primary teachers of their children and we're here to second their efforts to educate their children well.

How can an educational program contribute to advancing the social and economic integration of the community it serves?

Through friendship. It is our conviction that friendship — personal relationships — are the most effective means for bringing about social and econom-

¹ Cfr. Preface of *The Forge; Christ is passing by*, 80.

ic development. In his presentation, Mr. Winn explained how our programs achieve integration by serving as a bridge between neighborhoods and business communities. Here I will attempt to give a few examples of how this dynamic is at work in our programs².

Social integration. Karen, a white financial analyst who lives on Chicago's north side is tutor and mentor to Jakita, an African-American 6th grader from the west side of town. Mary, an African-American lawyer who works downtown meets each week with Rebecca, a Mexican immigrant, to help her with her Math and reading. One of our African-American students commented that it was at Metro that she 'befriended' a white person for the first time in her life. We're talking about real friendship, meaning that she had the name, telephone number and address of her tutor. Students who attend all African-American or Latino high schools say that it is at Metro & Midtown that they 'get their diversity' since only there can they meet and be friends with students from other neighborhoods of a different ethnicity.

Central to the work at Metro and Midtown is the driving force of friendship. This personal approach facilitates regular attendance to our after-school program. It also keeps professionals engaged and concerned about the growth of their students. We challenge professionals to put social concerns before personal plans and they are quick to rise to the occasion. Almost every week you witness an accountant or architect leave the office to 'be there' for their student. At times they then return to the office after 8:00 at night to finish the work they left behind.

Economic integration: The material décor and cleanliness of our facilities reflect an appreciation for the human dignity of our students. Blessed Josemaría spoke of a 'Christian materialism'. We make a concerted effort express the Christian belief in equality of people and the essential dignity of the less fortunate by materializing it in our buildings. We therefore make every effort to keep our building attractive and in good condition so that they can study and learn there. Providing our students with clean, quality work environments sends a strong message: their own dignity as children of God. We teach them to find God in his created things and reflect this awareness in the way they care for the center — the clean blackboard, the well-ordered classroom, the freshly painted walls, etc. Everything about our centers reflects this belief. Visitors are quick to comment that they are pleased to see such an attractive space made available to economi-

² Cfr. M. WINN, *Working Towards Socio-Economic Integration*, p. 67s.

cally disadvantaged students. In this way the centers serve as a ‘meeting ground’ for students and professionals from poor and rich communities.

The Metro and Midtown programs further economic integration with special summer programs for high school students. During the summer months we find opportunities for them to work in business and in the community by setting up summer internships. Through the efforts of donors and corporations we give inner city students the chance to earn a fair wage and gain valuable work experience, often for the first time. We also build bridges between inner city students and the corporate world by bringing in top professionals — often from their own communities — to speak about the qualities and virtues needed to be successful professionals, but even more importantly, persons of character.

Our programs play an active part in bridging the ‘digital divide’ between the world of technology and our inner-city students by offering computer classes. This may be one of the key factors in helping to bring about economic integration as we prepare our students to work professionally in the field of their choice.

Character Education is equally central to the Midtown Education Foundation’s programs. Now a full-fledged educational movement in the United States, character education has always been essential to Metro and Midtown. Our character education program is centered on virtues, those good habits which are proper to the human person and a child of God. Much is said of ‘self-esteem’ in character education in our country. We prefer, however, to speak of ‘self-worth’ rather than self-esteem since we believe that this term more accurately reflects a child’s dignity, and refers the source of their self-esteem, which ultimately comes from God. We teach the girls and boys that they are wonderful, not because they think they are, but because they are children of God. This is a powerful message which Blessed Josemaría has inspired in our programs and one that we share with our students and volunteers whether they are Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or Muslim. In the words of one teacher, “Everything you do at Metro makes sense. Your comprehensive vision fits with your philosophy and mission because you believe and your program reflects the belief — that everything can lead you to God”.

Unity of life. We have already spoken about how Blessed Josemaría promoted ‘unity of life’, that conscious effort to achieve harmony among the various facets of one’s life. Achieving social integration depends on an individual achieving this integration or unity of life on a personal level. Any society is the sum of its parts. I will attempt to illustrate how the Metro and Midtown programs facilitate social and economic integration by teaching students and volunteers to achieve personal integration.

Regarding program content, we educate children in the fullest sense of the word: *academically* (paying special attention to strengthening basic reading, writing and mathematics skills), *morally* (teaching them moral principles and teaching them to apply them to the real world), *spiritually* (encouraging students and volunteers alike to develop a strong sense of their divine childhood and to become souls of prayer), *physically* (through sports and dance programs) and *culturally* (by helping all to appreciate the great diversity of races, beliefs and peoples in our programs).

Working at this harmony or ‘unity of life’ is a daily affair in our programs. Mentors meet weekly with their students to set priorities and concretize goals for improvement in their academic and personal behavior. The key to our goal setting is virtues which are at the core of our character education program: generosity, industriousness, chastity, fortitude, respect for others, friendship, etc. In this way both students see the connection between knowing the good and being good. Not surprisingly, the influence of our weekly goal setting also moves upwards, from student to volunteer. Volunteers help the children set goals, but in the process of doing so are then challenged themselves to set their own personal goals thus leading to more ethical behavior on their part in the office, in their family and with their peers. The center also offers the volunteers weekly training sessions and classes on the dignity and nature of the human person. Parents too are kept abreast of the progress of their children when the mentors and staff regularly call them. Thus we see that social integration moves from the particular to the general; from each child to their family, from the volunteers to their peers and colleagues and ultimately from one individual to the society at large.

What does it mean to evangelize in a secular educational setting?

The scope of our work of evangelization is people and not structures. Blessed Josemaría encouraged us to “raise the spiritual temperature” in our place of work. He also taught us that the measure of apostolic effectiveness is the following guideline: “The real success or failure of our activities depends on whether, in addition to being humanly well-run, they help those who carry them out and those who make use of their services to love God, to feel their brotherhood with their fellow men, and to manifest these sentiments in a disinterested service of humanity”³. Because we work with anyone who can appreciate our mission and has a heart big enough to serve, we work side by side with Catholics, non-practicing Catholics, Christians belonging to different confessions, Jews, Muslims and even agnostics. Our hope is to teach the Catholics to love and prac-

³ *Conversations*, 31.

tice their faith more fervently. We expose other Christians to our Catholic faith and from time to time, God blesses them with the grace of faith. A number of students have asked to be baptized and we then work together with a parish to bring them into full communion with the Catholic faith. Recently a Jewish businessman visited our center wanting to donate his financial resources. He was thrilled to hear of our connection with Opus Dei and our inclusion of the spiritual dimension of the human person in the holistic education we give our students.

Excellent professional staff our volunteer programs, yet many do not practice any faith and literally have no contact with institutions or people who do live their faith. Often, tutoring at Metro or Midtown is their first intellectual and personal exposure to people who take their faith seriously. This encounter with others, who strive to make a connection between their faith, their professional work and their deeds of service, introduces them to new horizons of Christian living. This interaction of faith happens not only with the volunteers but on all levels of our organization (board members, teachers, children, parents) etc. People who have no formal contact with the Church or the Catholic faith touch it in and through the lives of lay Christians who seek God in their professional work and in their work of service. We can certainly say that Blessed Josemaría's influence on our apostolic work is most accurately characterized by this broad work of evangelization with all sectors of society in and through personal friendship.

Precisely because the point of contact in the MEF programs is people and not structures, the possibilities for bringing about social and economic integration in our country are immense. Similarly, due to our emphasis on personal friendship and the desire to bring all souls to Christ, the scope of evangelization in our apostolic work is limitless. In the words of Blessed Josemaría, our work of evangelization in Chicago, and beyond, is truly 'a sea without shores'⁴.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 120.