

Reflections on



Holy Cross~Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish

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How your Contributions Are Changing the Back of the Yards Neighborhood

Unless you take some time to really study the history of this neighborhood, and track the young people who have grown up in the Back of the Yards, you might not notice what really has made a difference: the emphasis on education of the children.

Young people are studying in places like Northwestern, Loyola, DePaul, Lewis, University of Chicago, University of Illinois, St. Xavier, City Colleges of Chicago, Columbia—and many have been supported with scholarships from the Peace and Education Scholarship. Many have found wisdom through teachers, business persons, and political leaders who have helped search out scholarship opportunities and other financial aid. Receiving such help is the only way they can complete an education.

What is especially noticeable is the number of young people who have completed a college education, and are returning to teach in the schools, volunteer to tutor, give a hand in social services and get involved in the problem solving for the neighborhood. At Boys Town of Chicago, a short term residence for runaway and homeless youth, 70% of the staff is native to the neighborhood. Some have masters degrees while others are working on college studies and need continued support.

At the same time, the entire workforce of the parish after-school program, 14 college students, dedicates 20 hours a week to mentoring, tutoring and accompanying 100 children every day. These young people are guiding our children through the difficulties that an economic depression creates in an area such as ours. This peer leadership helps maintain a “culture” of education in the neighborhood..

Last year, the Coalition awarded nearly 60 college scholarships—all to young people involved in volunteer service in the neighborhood. College students today are impacted by family stress from lack of economic resources, overcrowded housing from lost homes, loss of financial support for transportation and books, and rising college costs.

More than ever this year, your care is appreciated and needed. You influence an entire neighborhood when you support a student in college.

The **Peace and Education Coalition Scholarship fundraiser takes place Thursday, May 13th, 5:30-9 PM at the Stadium Club of U.S. Cellular Field.** Tickets are \$100, or you can help be a sponsor of the event. Check out www.peaceandeducation.org or the parish web site at www.hcihm.org for more information.

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“Turn away from sin and Believe in the Good News”

Ash Wednesday is a very busy day in our parish. With nine masses and prayer services in the course of the day, our presiders and ministers are in contact with hundreds, even thousands of people. Every year, I am deeply touched by the human connection that we make as we use the ashes to mark foreheads with the sign of the cross. Some respond “Amen,” others say “thanks” and many simply stay silent.

This year, as I met with a line of children, I repeated a familiar blessing phrase, recalling for them the importance of following the example of Jesus in loving others: “Turn away from sin and believe in the Good News.” One eight-year old boy stopped me short. As I marked his forehead, he looked at me and said in earnest,

“But I don’t know how to do that!”

I stopped the ritual for some moments, and talked with him briefly about what this could mean for him, and what he could do, and asked him if he thought he could do it, and he nodded and said, “I think so.”

Afterwards, I thought how that boy represents so many children and youth we come in contact with, who simply haven’t been taught the social and life skills they need to grow into healthy adults. We assume that if we say something once, that the young person should remember it, understand it, and practice it. But studies of child and adolescent development show that is not how it happens, that we adults need to regularly teach and remind young people of what is expected of them, particularly when encountering new situations.



In these days of reflection, I am grateful for the adults in this community -- parents, educators, social workers, probation officers, youth workers, and so many others – who know that it is our adult responsibility to carefully teach our children and youth the behaviors expected of them, rather than punish them for what they do not know.

I am especially grateful for the children and youth, like the boy on Ash Wednesday, who remind me in many ways of my responsibility to them. They are helping me become a better person.

- Sr. Angie Kolacinski, SH

Remembering the “Snow Queen”

I remember when I was six or seven years old, and reading some children’s stories that were rather scary— in particular, I remember the “Scissors Man”. He would run about and cut your thumbs off if you dared suck on one of them. I might have been left with a pretty traumatic image had it not been for a family who reassured me I was safe. I had to wonder if the reading of “The Snow Queen” might create a similar experience for the kids. This past December I read the Hans Christian Anderson tale to a group of 35 children, as parents sat with them to listen. The classic tale featured the triumph of good and the defeat of evil. The kids were relieved to know they were safe from the cold heart of the famous witch.

The idea of reading the book to kids was inspired by James Grusecki, a benefactor committed to caring for teens and children faced with environments of poverty. He asked if we would be interested in reading the book to kids and then take them to the theater play at Victory Gardens, on the north side of Chicago.



What a wonderful gift it turned out to be. Reading to children, their imaginations were engaged, though some cultural translations had to be made: the gingersnaps are like “biscochitos” and the swallows are “pajaros”.

Finally, we attended a Sunday afternoon matinee together at Victory Gardens. The magic of the story came alive with music and actors who reached into their souls. Because they had read the story, the kids, ages 7-13, knew what to expect. They were transfixed by the characters and afterwards had the opportunity to say hello to a couple of them. Once back home, we had some pizza together and they were given a hard copy of the book to treasure in their homes. They were very grateful.

During a recent neighborhood meeting, Paul Lopez quoted a fact researched at the University of Illinois regarding the reading opportunities for our children: in the suburbs the average family home has approximately 200 books per child. In the Back of the Yards, the average family has 1.7 books per child! After seeing what a book can do for a child in this neighborhood, several members of the Peace and Education Coalition are now working on a used book store, where kids can pick up books to take home, read and imagine again. As Albert Einstein once said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” May our children imagine again and again.

- Fr. Bruce Wellems, CMF

The Decision of one Person Helps Save a Neighborhood

I was planning to walk an early Friday morning “December Posadas” with other Pastors at the Detention Center, but earlier that week I received a call from a lawyer asking me to go to court with a neighborhood family. The father was facing deportation, after having been in the country for 20 years. After a couple of years, the case was drawing to a close and the Judge was ready to make a decision on whether the man would be separated from his four children and his wife, or if he would start the path to becoming a citizen. I was asked to testify.

I waited in the hallway in the Federal building with one of his older sons, age 20. The young man attends college and dreams of becoming an immigration lawyer. He said to me as we sat, “I think I am losing my faith—I am not sure God exists or hears prayers.” Over the years, this experience is fairly common for young people, especially those who face fear, have been threatened in some way, or have suffered with no apparent reason. I told him that such experiences perhaps teach hope, and hope is fundamental to faith. He responded that he has read a lot— in fact, he had studied philosophy, religions, and he reads newspapers. He was concluding that Church consists of people who do not really pay attention to the hardships he witnesses in our neighborhood. So, I sat with him and told him his giving makes a difference.

After two hours, the door opened and I was called into the court room. After a swearing in, the Judge asked, “Can this man find work in Mexico as a plumber? Can you tell me there is no work in Mexico?” I responded, “Of that experience I only know if you do not know someone, you cannot get a job so easily.” In my heart, I knew this family, so respected by many others, would find a way to survive, despite the hardship of returning. So I said, “However, this family is responsible for bringing peace to our neighborhood. They teach recreation in the park, they help kids on soccer teams... they teach *ballet folklórico*, and they set an example of peace in a neighborhood needing much effort in creating peace. Taking this family away would make the neighborhood a little less peaceful... and a little more violent. We have enough violence, we need peacemakers.”

Then I left. I wasn’t sure if I would ever see this father again. But a few days later the older son found me at another Posadas in the neighborhood. He told me, “The Judge ruled in favor of my dad, he is going to be a citizen!” You could see the excitement and the hope in the son’s face. I know he will remain committed forever to helping others. He will bring much hope and a little more peace.

- Fr. Bruce Wellems, CMF

