

NativityMiguel Schools

Make a Difference

By Peter Feuerherd



The poor you will always have with you. Father James F. Keenan, SJ, Director of Development for the New York Province, made that point shortly before leaving his previous job as President of New York Nativity, responsible for three middle schools in Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn.

The original Nativity Mission Center, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, developed from an active Jesuit ministry in the neighborhood during the 1970s. At the time, it was thought that the lure of the streets could only be combated through an extensive schooling program for adolescent boys, including all-day classes and study halls, combined with a summer program in the Adirondacks focusing on building community and outdoor activities. Another innovation developed later, as students

Students at Nativity Mission Center, New York.

were supported in their high school studies with tuition assistance and study hall space.

The concept proved so successful that NativityMiguel schools – the Miguel in the name is in honor of a Christian Brother educator, one of the religious communities partnered with the Jesuits in urban education – serve 4,300 middle school students in 64 schools over 27 states. Almost all the students come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The national network claims a 92 percent graduation rate and 96 percent of its high school graduates go on to college.

The schools feature small class sizes, low tuitions subsidized by benefactors, and “a dedication of love” from its teachers and administrators, said Fr. Keenan.

The goal is to place these schools in the toughest, most poverty-scarred neighborhoods, offering an alternative to troubled urban public schools. Nativity schools in the New York area now also include St. Ignatius School in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx and Brooklyn Jesuit Prep in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Other schools using the model are in Buffalo and St. Aloysius School in Harlem, a parochial school that is affiliated with the network, although it is formally operated by the parish. Another school is in the planning stages for Rochester (see story).

Fr. Keenan has long experience in Jesuit education at St. Peter’s Prep in Jersey City, Canisius High School in Buffalo, McQuaid Jesuit in Rochester and Xavier High School in Manhattan. Those jobs had their challenges, he noted, but none like the work needed in the fragile communities served by the NativityMiguel schools.

Despite their track record of success these schools are also feeling the economic pinch. Only about two percent of the costs are paid for through tuition. One exceptionally generous gift will keep the New York City program breaking even this year, but when that runs out, more corporate and individual benefactors will have to be found in a difficult economy.

“It’s going to be tough the next couple of years,” predicted Fr. Keenan. But wherever the poor are, the NativityMiguel schools will continue to serve as a model educational choice for hard-pressed communities.