

Faith, love and 'how it works at West'

REFLECTION

By MICHAEL CARLSON

When a student in my classroom asked why I cared so much, I naturally responded, "That's how it works at West." West Philadelphia Catholic High School is not merely a school. For our students, who all come from challenging backgrounds, it is a sanctuary. To have a place where they are treated fairly, respectfully and with love is the difference between despair and hope. Here that love is a constant.

Administered through the De La Salle Brothers of the Christian Schools, the Sisters of St. Joseph, the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and other religious congregations, our heritage is rich and our alumni remain loyal. West Catholic distinguishes itself from other Philadelphia Catholic schools and charter schools by its pride. As the Philadelphia archdiocese continues to close Catholic high schools, that pride is only strengthened. When I first heard our motto, "West is best!" I thought it was a mere boast. After my time here, I believe in that motto. Its esprit is residual and contagious.

A principal goal of mine as freshman adviser is to guide students to accept help without feeling weak, stupid, insecure or less than what they are. I interview and track all of them, especially those with academic or social difficulties. Our students' backgrounds, environments, and life outside of West are often underprivileged, unsupportive and difficult.

To provide freshmen with positive role models and nonjudgmental listeners, I moderate the peer mentor program that was established by my predecessor. Peer mentors are paired with freshman mentees in need of social, academic or personal guidance. Mentors are trained to simply listen to their mentees and share their own experiences as appropriate. The value of that listening and sharing is immeasurable.

Freshmen often tell me things like, "I didn't have to study so much at my old school," "You guys are stricter than my old school," "I got A's so easily last year. Why do teachers here make us work so hard?"

I usually respond by reminding them, "We're different."

Two West Catholic 2008-2009 seniors were awarded Gates Millennium Scholarships. This achievement is impressive regardless of a student's background. Considering the significant economic and demographic challenges faced by most West Catholic students, this achievement is unprecedented. Moreover, our standardized test scores document that students' academic abilities improve significantly with each passing year at West Catholic.

I attribute the success not only to the teachers and administrators who contribute beyond the essential — holding afterschool tutoring, moderating extracurricular activities and working long hours. I attribute our school's success to the students who thrive in the environment we provide for them. Ultimately, it is their ownership that determines and maintains our excellent reputation.

Encouraging students to join sports teams, clubs and student groups, I try to find a niche for everyone. West offers

dozens of extracurricular activities.

Some of the most rewarding experiences I have at West Catholic are after school. I started a Writers' Workshop that meets regularly for students interested in writing and publishing fiction and poetry, and I play trombone in the Jazz Band. I also co-moderate and run with West Catholic students in Students Run Philly Style, an organization training inner-city students to run long-distance races and marathons.

I personally did not have the option of attending a Catholic high school, and when I came to West Catholic I was unsure precisely what made a Catholic high school "Catholic." It is made Catholic by its sense of purpose.

The majority of our students are not

Roman Catholic and do not participate in the Roman Catholic church. However, they are indelibly marked in the Catholic faith and demonstrate that mark when they exhibit a sense of true purpose. By that it is meant that West Catholic students graduate with faith.

In the Christian Brothers' tradition, classes begin by asking students, "Remember we are in the holy presence of God." West Catholic reminds not only its students, but the Catholic church that caring, pride and purpose come alive through faith.

West Catholic does not supplement the life of the church. It is its very backbone.

Catholic education at its finest imitates both Christ the teacher and

Christ the healer. For believers, the significance of schools like West Catholic that serve underprivileged inner-city students cannot be ignored, dismissed or undervalued. It manifests nothing less than the holy presence of God. That's how it works at West.

[Michael Carlson is a volunteer with the Christian Brothers of De La Salle, serving as a freshman adviser and religion teacher at West Philadelphia Catholic High School.]

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