

## Major Donation Opens Catholic School Seats to Neediest Kids

By Jon Minners  
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A record-breaking donation of \$22.5 million by philanthropist Robert Wilson to the Archdiocese of New York for its Inner-City Scholarship Fund Program is changing the face of Bronx education.

The Gift from the retired hedge fund manager, who was named one of *Business Week's* "50 Most Generous Philanthropists," will enable an astounding 3,000 children to fill 8,000 possible seats at inner-city Catholic schools.

The \$22.5 million is earmarked for the Cardinal's Scholarship Program, which was begun in 2005 with a mandate to provide scholarships to needy children to fill every empty seat in Archdiocesan inner-city schools by 2010.

During the first two years of the program, 3,700 students have received scholarships with a maximum individual tuition value of \$2,100 a year, and now attend the Catholic inner-city school of their choice, with a number of them located in the Bronx.

Cardinal Edward Egan has expressed his gratitude for "such historic and farsighted support from Mr. Wilson for the education and future wellbeing of our neediest children in the Archdiocese."

The Cardinal's Scholarship Program is the archdiocesan response to thousands of New York families living at or below the poverty line who want a high-quality education but cannot afford tuition costs.

"I'm a product of a Catholic school education and a single mother," said Judy Santiago, principal of St. Simon Stock Elementary School on Valentine Avenue, where students benefit from the unique scholarship.

"While we are aiming to increase enrollment, rent is going up, people are struggling to pay their mortgages, and we have higher taxes and increases in so many other bills," she said. "When it comes to a Catholic school education, a month's tuition could equal half a person's rent. As a result, there has been a sharp decline in enrollment. These scholarships can help change that."

Santiago knows how difficult it can be. Her son attended St. Helena's School and was not eligible to receive money from the scholarship when he was accepted into Regis High School. Luckily enough for Santiago, he obtained other scholarships that lessened the burden of providing her son with the only education she felt comfortable providing him.

“In a Catholic school, I felt he was safe, that he was given love and care and receiving an upbringing of wanting to go to church and learn about God,” she said. “I felt that a Catholic school education made him a more well-rounded individual.”

The Archdioceses points to several Bronx students who have shown a need for such a program and who are excelling in various local Catholic schools.

Adele Del Vecchio is a ninth-grader at St. Barnabas High School and is the daughter of a single mother who struggles to keep her in school. Vecchio continues to impress, showing a love for science and an expressed interest in marine biology.

Terence Markham is a fourth-grader at Immaculate Conception School on Gun Hill Road. A child of immigrants from the West Indies, Markham continues to make his parents proud as a straight-A student who enjoys reading, writing and poetry.

Britnie Anderson is a ninth-grader at St. Catharine Academy whose parents separated three years ago. Her mother works at Montefiore Medical Center and attends classes at the College of New Rochelle in order to give her and her child a better life.

An ambitious outreach campaign has been launched by the Inner-City Scholarship Fund and the Archdiocesan Department of Education to inform families in all elementary grades, as well as children just starting school in September 2007, about the thousands of scholarship supported by Wilson’s gift.

“I encourage everyone to take advantage of this program,” Santiago said. “A Catholic school education is something your child can take with them throughout his or her life. It is an education that continues to give back and we thank the donors who helped to invest in our children’s lives and their future.”

Parents can call (212) 515-7137 or go to <http://www.innercityscholarshipfund.org/> on the Internet for information about the scholarships and locations for open houses.