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Catholic schools that saved so many kids need rescuing

By Naomi Schaefer Riley



All Hallows High School on E. 164th St. in the Bronx.

How does the child of impoverished Dominican immigrants who speak no English beat cancer, become high-school valedictorian, graduate from Columbia University and get a job working at JPMorgan?

In the case of Jason Tejada, the short answer is Catholic schools.

Though his parents did not make enough money to afford the bargain-basement tuition at the Incarnation School in Washington Heights, the Children's Scholarship Fund paid most of his way — the Tejadas only had to contribute \$500 per year. Jason received another scholarship to attend the prestigious All Hallows School, an all-boys Catholic school in The Bronx.

He occasionally thinks back and wonders what would have happened if he had not received these scholarships, if he had not been able to attend these institutions. When he thinks about the schools he went to until fifth grade, this is what he remembers: There were the drug busts on the corner nearby. There were fights inside the school. But the biggest difference between that school and Incarnation is that the latter “felt like a family” — like school was a continuation of home.

To this day, Jason maintains, it was the nurturing attitudes and the unrelentingly high standards of the teachers at these schools, working together with his parents, who saved him from the fate of many of his friends and relatives. He remembers teachers who made him write three drafts of each paper — something he continued to do in college. He remembers classes that were strict but managed to instill a love of learning.

His devotion to school would be severely tested. In the spring of his eighth-grade year, Jason was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. “They told me it was a tumor, and I remember I left the doctor’s office and I punched a wall in the hospital. I was frustrated and my mom was crying and I just walked ahead . . . I was so mad.”

But Jason didn’t go home. He went right back to school. The day was over, but after-school activities were in progress. “The first person I saw was my eighth-grade teacher, and I just started crying. I could not stop crying.” Throughout his treatments, Jason continued to find comfort from the staff at Incarnation. He remembers being in the emergency room at 2 a.m. and his mother saying to him that he could stay home from school the following day. It was the first time the woman who was pushing him so hard had ever suggested such a thing. And he said, “No, I’m gonna go.”



Jason Tejada

He missed the first few weeks of high school, but his teachers sent stacks of assignments to his hospital room. They were not going to give up on him if he was willing to work. And work he did, for the next four years. In the fall of his senior year of high school, Jason was ready to apply to CUNY when his guidance counselor looked at his transcript. “What about Harvard, Cornell and Columbia?” she asked.

Jason decided on Columbia, where he majored in economics and ancient history. (One of his middle-school teachers instilled in him an interest in ancient Egypt.) Since graduating last year, he has been working at JPMorgan.

The details of Jason's story may be particularly poignant, but the success that Catholic schools can bring underprivileged students is widely understood.

The achievement, graduation rates and college completion rates are much higher for students who attend Catholic school than public school, even controlling for family income. A recent Brookings/Harvard study found that African American students in New York who won and used a scholarship to attend private school starting in kindergarten were 24% more likely to attend college than those who applied but didn't win a scholarship.

Sadly, all around this city and all over the country Catholic schools are shutting their doors and fewer kids will be able to have the opportunity Jason did. In his old neighborhood, the Annunciation middle school and Mother Cabrini High School recently shut down in order to have a greater number of "fully enrolled" schools, according to the Archdiocese. Incarnation once had as many as 1,400 students. Now it is down to 300.

Perhaps the blow of closing Catholics schools was softened for some by the fact that the high performing Success Charter School Network is opening a new school at Annunciation's old building. But of those thousands of students who do not win the charter school lotteries each year, many would happily send their kids to Catholic schools.

While the church has kept tuition relatively low at less than \$4,000 per student (a fifth of what New York City spends for each student), the city's working-class parents simply cannot afford it. And there isn't enough scholarship money for the Tejas of today.

In principle, Catholic schools have enough empty seats to accommodate the kids who are stuck in the city's nearly 150 schools officially designated as "failing." Individual donors like those supporting CSF and the Inner City Scholarship Fund have given hundreds of millions to the cause but this is no longer a matter for private philanthropy alone.

We need a system of vouchers or tuition tax credits (like the one Gov. Cuomo failed to pass this spring) that would guarantee kids like Jason continued access to quality education.

New York City has more than enough underprivileged kids stuck in failing neighborhood schools to welcome in more charters and keep the doors of every Catholic school open.

Naomi Schaefer Riley is the author of "Opportunity and Hope: Transforming Children's Lives Through Scholarships," out this month.