

Washington Middle School for Girls creates great expectations backed with a Catholic foundation

BY ANNA WEAVER

Catholic Standard

In the Anacostia area of Southeast Washington, on the second floor of the Town Hall Education Arts Recreation Campus (THEARC), is a thriving middle school supporting at-risk sixth- to eighth-grade girls. The Washington Middle School for Girls (WMSG), which has a second Washington View campus for fourth and fifth graders nearby, prepares young women for high school and higher education through a unique extended-day program.

"These girls are something else," Religious of Jesus and Mary Sister Mary Bourdon, WMSG's head of school, said with pride while showing a visitor around the THEARC campus recently. Students in various classrooms were practicing Spanish vocabulary, watching "Roots" as part of social studies coursework and working on homework in study hall. On Jan. 20, the girls got front row seats in the THEARC auditorium as First Lady Michelle Obama helped WalMart launch its new healthy eating initiative. The students happily told the first lady about their school garden.

FOUNDATION OF FAITH

Sister Mary pointed out that the school's motto is "In the Spirit of Courageous Women" and works around the clock to support their 101 students as they make their way through difficult school years when many of their peers may drop-out or give up on their educational aspirations. But beyond the academics and extracurriculars, faith forms the foundation of WMSG.

The Society of the Holy Child Jesus and the Religious of Jesus and Mary sisters in collaboration with the National Council of Negro Women began the Washington Middle School for Girls as an after-school tutoring program in 1997 before gradually expanding to its two current campuses. This past July, the independent school was

officially approved by the Archdiocese of Washington as a Catholic school, which development and community outreach director Kathleen McMackin said affirms the school's efforts. She and Sister Mary both say that while about 95 percent of WMSG students are not Catholic, prayer and an emphasis on community run throughout the school day.

"It's a Catholic school because we're Catholic, not because the students are Catholic," McMackin said, paraphrasing the late Washington Cardinal James Hickey, who supported the founding of WMSG.

Sister Mary said that "prayer is at the core" of the WMSG school day, which begins with a morning assembly with prayer and liturgical readings. "I think prayer in the morning gets carried out into the community the rest of the day," she said. "It's that community that doesn't just happen in that [assembly] room but all day long."

The Washington Middle School for Girls also has religion class twice a week and participates in regular service projects, like a recent eighth-grade bake sale to support the Haiti Mission of the Religious of Jesus and Mary and the Washington View campus' current fundraiser for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial on the National Mall.

"We want them to really have an experience of the faith from the theological point of view as well as the experiential point of view," Sister Mary said.

EXTENDED DAY

Volunteers from various Catholic lay volunteer corps have taught or helped with extracurricular activities at WMSG and some have gone on to full-time work there, like Brianne Weitzel, science and social studies teacher and Sailing Club moderator. She and the rest of the faculty all run at least one extracurricular activity because the school has an "extended day"



CS PHOTOS BY RAFAEL CRISOSTOMO

On Feb. 24, science teacher Brianne Weitzel goes over classwork with eighth grader Kashmere Hunter in the Washington Middle School for Girls science lab, which was donated by the Order of Malta.

program lasting from 7:30 a.m. until 5:30 p.m. After a more typical academic schedule of classes ends at 3:10 p.m., the girls have a break before all participating in afterschool activities and clubs like photography, yoga, international cooking classes, and a running club. They also get to choose between fine arts programs held at THEARC and sponsored by the Washington Ballet, Levine School of Music or Corcoran Artreach.

The school also has a full-time director of student life and graduate support, Kimberly Hopwood, who not only helps the seventh and eighth graders get ready for high school but follows their progress as they leave Washington Middle School for Girls, checking on their grades and helping them in any way she can. "The whole school is pretty much oriented toward the future," Sister Mary said.

"Our goal is for each student to complete high school and to go on to college or other higher education," she said, adding that with the support of the school and the exposure to various activities and potential careers they receive there, "I think one of the worst things that could happen to young people is that they close off their options."

Ninety-eight percent of WMSG graduates go on to graduate from high school, a far higher rate than is typical for most Anacostia area schools. It also keeps up its high attendance rate of 97 percent by providing meals for the girls and even access to laundry machines in case they can't otherwise wash their uniforms, which Sister Mary says is her "no-excuses" policy.

Washington Middle School for Girls also does not charge tuition except for a monthly \$25 general fee. Each girl's education costs \$15,000, which comes from fundraising and donations.

Two students who have flourished at WMSG are eighth graders Acia Sands and Chrishae Hall. Both are non-Catholics but have applied to Catholic high schools next year because they loved the Catholic-based environment of their middle school.

"I think [a Catholic school] is important because I want to stay around the same environment of people," Hall said.

"If I need help I know I can get the attention I need," Sands said. "The teachers, they really care about you. They really want to see you succeed."

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

She also enjoys the all-girls environment. "Sometimes when we are around boys, we don't want to say the wrong things. Here you learn it's OK to mess up sometimes."

Sands says she wants to be a corporate lawyer and at WMSG, she's getting insight into "how much work it takes." Hall would like to be a doctor or a psychologist.

Development and community outreach director McMackin said that school aims to improve students' self-expectations.

"Perhaps they came in with no expectations of themselves. And when they leave here they've changed their expectations for themselves, the faculty has changed their expectations of themselves," she said. "Because I think so much of what we do in life is what is expected of us."

For Sister Mary, it's important that the Washington Middle School for Girls helps its students look beyond the school and to their community at large. "Catholic schools are community builders and the community beyond the walls is just as important," she said. "Everything they're learning here will somehow impact not only their lives but the lives of the whole community."



From left, eighth graders Acia Sands and Chrishae Hall discuss high school applications with WMSG head of school Sister Mary Bourdon and director of student life and graduate support Kimberly Hopwood.