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Hope in Chicago's Inner-City

Midtown Achievement Program, a corporate work of Opus Dei, has been bringing hope to Chicago youth since 1963. This report from Compassion and Culture Magazine tells how.

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In a day and age when polarization is everything—men, we are told, cannot understand women, whites cannot understand blacks, suburbanites cannot understand the

cities—the Midtown Educational Foundation (MEF) in inner-city Chicago is an anachronism. Midtown has quietly taken on the task of helping to educate students in one of America's most troubled school systems—educating them in mind, body, and soul. It has brought together people of different races, beliefs, educational levels, and from a variety of social and economic backgrounds to learn from one another. Midtown takes the position —at once trendy and time-tested— that character is at the heart of education, and that classroom learning cannot be divorced from good moral habits.

Contrary to all expectations in this polarized age, Midtown works. Virtually all Midtown kids get a high school diploma in a city where graduation rates hover around forty percent. Most go on to college or some kind of technical training.

Perhaps the greatest testament to Midtown's success is that many of those who work in the program as coaches, maintenance workers, and sports instructors are themselves Midtown graduates. This goes right to the top: Jim Palos, a recent former director of MEF, who was educated at Columbia and the Kellogg School of Business at Northwestern (where he served as director of minority enrollment), is himself a Midtown kid. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Midtown is today well-complimented by programs in Washington, D.C. and New York City that emulate its formula.

Concerned that disadvantaged youth in the inner city were being left out of the nation's expanding prosperity, a group of Chicago businessmen and professionals founded Midtown in 1963.

Midtown's founders had gusto and determination in abundance, but not much else. Gil Kaufman, a member of that original group, recalls that Midtown "had no money and didn't know how to raise money. We didn't even know how to run a board meeting." The original founders not only donated $30,000 to buy buildings for activities, but gave their time and effort to strip, sand, paint, and plaster the rooms in the predominantly Italian and Mexican neighborhoods of Chicago. 1965 saw the establishment of youth programs in three buildings on the Near West Side including a band, a football team and a photography club, among others. In the '70s, the Midtown Achievement Program, or MAP, was initiated, and since that time it has become the centerpiece of MEF's many offerings.

While Midtown runs various programs year-round, including an

after-school tutoring program, a technology program aimed at introducing boys to computer use, and mini-camps during winter and spring breaks, the heart of the program is MAP. For over thirty years, this seven-week summer program for inner-city junior high school boys has provided young men with the opportunity to play sports and supplement their academic work.

In theory, MAP is easily described. Boys are divided into teams of eight to ten members. These teams spend half of the day in classes, and the other half on the playing field, where they rotate among two sports a day: softball, soccer, hockey, volleyball, and the crown jewel of the inner city, basketball. Each team is assigned a coach, usually a sixteen-year-old graduate of the program, and a college-age advisor. MAP sounds just like many summer programs.

What distinguishes MAP, however, is its emphasis on character education. Each boy takes a class called "character development," or CD, that features basic, nondenominational moral instruction: responsibility, perseverance, honesty, service, and living out duty to faith, family, and community. In CD class, teachers try to make a connection between adolescent life and moral axioms—don't lie, obey proper authorities, fulfill your responsibilities. The approaches are various and are always open to refinement. Always, the aim is to make it real, to make these principles applicable to the boys' lives.

Character development isn't simply confined to the classroom, however. The sports field also provides opportunities for growth. Every Midtown kid gets the opportunity to play, and participants are expected to play to their potential and to improve

it. Team play is emphasized over victory by one or two champions. Gentlemanly conduct is taught. The sports field teaches boys both to win and lose graciously.

Personal Attention

It is the advisor who makes the Midtown program work. Each advisor, usually a college student who is volunteering his summer, works with two teams, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The advisor pulls every boy on his teams aside twice a week for a fifteen or twenty minute personal chat. Topics of conversation range from sports, classes and friends to more serious issues like difficult home situations, neighborhood pressure to experiment with drugs and alcohol and to join gangs, and the importance of making a life plan that is realistic— and sticking to it. Each session ends with a practical

resolution to improve some small area of life in the hope of building habits of good character.

Here is a common Midtown conversation:

“Jose, how much TV do you watch every day?”

“Not too much.”

How much is not too much?”

Great show of deep thought, face screws up in concentration, (I don’t know, I watch so little.)

“Maybe – an hour a day? I always do my homework before I watch TV.”

Uh-huh, nods the advisor. “Jose, at our last meeting your Mom told me you watch at least six hours a day after school, and you rarely do your homework.”

Shock! Disbelief! Consternation! (I've been caught!)

Conversations like this one are one reason why Midtown is deadly serious about parental involvement. There are several parent-advisor conferences during the summer, and each advisor is expected to be in weekly phone contact with his boys' parents. Parents and advisors trade information, advisors check up on whether resolutions are being kept, and parents share specific areas of concern: Jaime fights a lot with his sisters. John's room is a mess. Dennard never does any chores at home.

Parents are each asked to pay a small fee to prove they are sincere in their desire to help their boy develop habits of good character. For many, even a small fee is a strain (fifty dollars on average) but no one is turned away because of an inability

to pay. Each boy is asked if he really wants to be in the program, and advisors are repeatedly assured during orientation that the boys really do want to participate.

Midtown boys are average adolescents. They are subjected to the same mind-boggling mood swings; they ricochet constantly between the most au courant sophistication and childish temper tantrums; are alternately independent and clingy. They can be painfully cruel and magnanimously open-handed; they are often honest, thrifty, wise, and responsible; frequently deceptive, lazy, and petty. In short, just like any thirteen-year-old you know.

Nobody gets through adolescence without a few bumps, and nobody expects Midtown to make instant saints. For Midtown kids, though, there is a slim margin for error in

life, no safety nets. They don't have good schools, safe neighborhoods or after-school soccer to help them along. One slip of character, one bad decision, and boy may well end up as five-hundred words in a precinct homicide report.

"So, Jason, last time we talked you promised to clean up the dishes without being asked. Did ya do it?"

"Yeah."

Pause.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah I'm sure."

"Really?"

Exasperation, protestations of innocence: I can't believe you think I'm lying!

"Really?"

“Ummm…no.”

In the end, Jason did do the dishes.

This may seem like small stuff, but it is the idea behind Midtown: little acts build habits, and only habits of good character enable you to resist big temptations—quick drug money, dropping out, letting a college application slide. It’s easier to tell a kid not to commit a crime when he’s already in the habit of being honest about the little things.

Keeping the Doors Open

Like any not-for-profit organization, Midtown is in a constant battle to fund its programs. However, it benefits from the backing of some of the largest corporations in the Chicago area. Walgreens president and CEO L. Daniel Jorndt and Sondra A. Healy, the chairman of Turtle Wax, Inc., are both recent additions to the Midtown board of directors. Both

organizations are generous donors. Virginia McCaskey, the owner of the Chicago Bears, has been a longtime Midtown supporter through the team's "Bears Care Fund," and Midtown is usually visited by at least one coach or player each summer. Other corporate donors include Kraft, Inc., and the Amoco Corporation, while foundation support has been provided by the Aon Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and the William G. McGowan Charitable Fund, Inc.

Midtown's original space at 718 South Loomis Street is now used to oversee operations for MAP. The boy's program has moved into a new building on the grounds of St. Mary of the Angels School in Bucktown, a formerly Polish neighborhood undergoing rapid gentrification.

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