

Crotona, an educational program in the Bronx

The Crotona Center's programs help about 200 boys a year expand their horizons and gain important virtues.

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To Chris Pacheco, the Bronx seems like a country. At least, that is what he blurted out one Friday evening during a game when he was asked to name a country. The wild statement drew lots of good-natured laughs

from the seventeen grammar school boys and two counselors sitting around the living room at 843 Crotona Park North, a warm and inviting, turn-of-the-century house in the South Bronx, recently renovated with the help of a significant donation from UPS.

Laughter mixed with challenging educational games are key ingredients in the after-school activities at the house, for boys ages 10 through 18 who want to take their studies and personal development seriously. Monday and Wednesday is for the fourth through sixth grade students, Tuesday and Thursday is for seventh and eighth graders, and Saturday is for the high school group. Wednesday also features a program in which financial industry professionals tutor students at Columbia University and at their Manhattan offices.

Starting at 4 PM and ending at 7 PM, every session at the Center begins with a study period, during which the boys do their homework or perhaps receive tutoring.

Afterwards, they go to the living room for a get-together, which becomes a setting for building human camaraderie and friendship. It is an occasion to sit and talk, sharing thoughts, ideas and knowledge with the others. Each boy reads from a publication dealing with current events, usually *The Economist* or *The Wall Street Journal*, which stretches his vocabulary and helps him learn to pronounce words properly. The other boys have to be paying attention, though, because anybody can be called on to summarize what was read. The moderator then asks questions that force the boys to grasp how world events relate to their lives in the Bronx.

According to Program Coordinator Eduardo (Eddie) Llull, "We aren't just providing tutoring, or a chance to have outings. Our mission is character development. Self-discipline is what we want to create. We see that the boys value the program as something special."

The program helps the boys to develop self-control and a sense of right and wrong. "I am able to get our spirit across to some parents by asking 'who controls your boy? his body, his hunger, or himself? If some boy steals a pen from another boy should we laugh that off? No, because that wrong,'" Llull recounts.

And success stories emerge. Luis Ramos, now in high school, came to the program as a sixth grader. Intelligent and curious, he says simply, "Crotona gives me a direction in life. It helps me learn who I am, how to struggle without giving up,

and it teaches me that I have the responsibility to build up the others."

Often the counselors and tutors are the boys' only positive role models, and sometimes they are their only father-figure as well. Occasionally, exposure to mature adult men provokes dramatic changes in their attitude and behavior. For example, Rusber Nunez, a formerly troubled youth being raised by his grandmother, is so excited about the Center activities he strives to be at the house even on the days not dedicated to his group.

As Llull explains, "He wants to come over the house to study whenever he can. No one else has ever given him real discipline, what is called tough love. He is getting the attention a father would give, and he is seeing that we really care about him. Additionally, his grandmother is rewarding him at home for his much

improved behavior, and so he sees that it does 'pay' to be good."

Although Rusber was a little rough around the edges, the staff could reason with him, and show him why the atmosphere of discipline was good for him. This is also true for the other boys in the program. The counselors find that a lot of the club members are anxious to show that they have finished their homework, that their grades are getting better, that their detentions are down.

Juan Carlos Franco has become much more serious about his school work. Llull notes, "He was a good boy but then he became rebellious, questioning authority, which is common in adolescence. I had to discipline him, and as a result he gained a new level of understanding about the program. By his recent actions, he is showing his leadership and his realization of what he can to

do for the others. It was important to sit down with him and explain the ramifications of his actions and what it means for his future. Now if any problems crop up, all I have to say is: 'remember what we spoke about.'"

A helpful tactic used to foster both discipline and teamwork is a kind of reverse Olympics, called the demerit point system. Demerits are given when a student does something wrong, such as using ghetto language, being disrespectful, or fooling around. The number of demerit points given, which can be from 10 to 100 or even up to 500, depends on the severity of the infraction. Demerit points are taken away whenever a boy excels in some skill or performs little acts of service to the others.

Rather than being given to the boy, the demerits are imposed on the group. If a group chalks up 1000

demerits, then their next outing is cancelled. Any boy who fouls up knows that he is taking away something desirable from the others, and he will search out ways of making it up. In many ways, therefore, the demerit system binds them closer to each other. On the human level, the boys catch on that helping one another is a reflection of a community, and the teachers can also explain to some of the boys that, on the supernatural level, it reflects the communion of saints. A simple explanation is given: you are not alone; you are part of this group, or family. You have to direct your actions in a way that you are not just concerned about yourself, but are concerned about everybody.

"For those who have been in the program for a while, it's just second nature for them," comments a counselor.

Recently, Llull had to correct a boy strongly. Later, in the living room get-together, he gave the boy an opportunity to take off points by asking a question that he knew. This way, the boy looks good and he has a chance to raise the tone of the get-together. His standing in the group improves and he feels better about himself. The concept is: correct when necessary, then make them look good, and always end in a joyful mood.

These brief cameos help answer the question of why the Crotona Center, which is sponsored by the South Bronx Educational Foundation (SBEF), is intensely involved in the neighborhood. During the 1970s and 80s, the area was awash with drugs, violence, and youth gangs. As a counter force, the SBEF was formed in 1988, bringing together the Crotona Center for boys and the Rosedale Center for girls. The

programs were started by some members of Opus Dei and their friends, and are guided by Catholic social teachings and the spirit of Opus Dei, which places a high value on exercising virtue in everyday life.

Although the weekday after school activities at the new Center are the most intense formational efforts, there is also a summer program, along with a leadership and culture club for high school students and Saturday morning tutoring sessions at a local school. The Saturday tutoring program involves about 75 boys and 25 tutors.

Llull points out that the Center reaches out to the boys' fathers also. A program aptly named Family Fathers allows the fathers to discuss family issues while working to improve their English. The fathers read from a book on parenting and discuss its content, which allows

them to see how they can assist in the formation their sons. Another benefit of the project is that the fathers learn how they can help their son read better.

Making an investment in the community

Program director John Riccobono also recognizes that character formation is the goal, and he wants to help each boy who comes to the program. He views these activities as a long term investment, believing that over time the effect of the formation the boys receive will be seen in the community.

Anything that expands their horizons is important, states John. "Some of the boys respond fairly quickly to our character development, about caring for the others -- you really don't need to tutor them as much in their schoolwork, they become more self-reliant," he notes. "We try to visit

the families and learn what the atmosphere is in the home. We explain to the parents that the actions of their boys define who they are. We also help them understand what the molding process is, so that we are in tune with the parents."

John also drives about a dozen boys to tutoring sessions every Wednesday during the school year. The boys have a mentor/tutor relationship with various young professionals and meet at AG Edwards, a brokerage firm in Manhattan. In addition to providing one-on-one help with school work, these financial professionals also broaden the students' outlook on the business world.

The boys' gratitude can be seen in their enthusiasm, and for that reason, the young men who volunteer their time look forward to dealing with the youngsters. The

comfortable surroundings most of these young businessmen had growing up contrasts with that of the boys, and the stock traders and other professionals get a lot of satisfaction from helping the youngsters, often gaining more than they give.

During the trip in the van from the Bronx to Manhattan, John might start up an educational game or a discussion on some important current event topic, allowing everyone to contribute his opinions. Recently, the conversation focused on abortion and the political atmosphere surrounding this subject.

John also took a group of high school students to visit a successful businessman in Connecticut who owns an impressive collection of expensive automobiles. Of course, the boys delighted in looking over the shiny and expensive vehicles, but an important purpose of the October

trip was to help them learn the value of hard work, which is needed before anyone can acquire anything like that automobile collection.

The spirit that pervades the rooms in the Crotona Center is the same that whistled down the halls of the nearby CS 150 school for six weeks during a recent summer program. Some 50 boys sat in school classrooms going over math, history, science and reading for half of each day and devoted the other half to sports instruction and competition. The sports sessions helped the boys develop physically and learn about teamwork. They had a field trip every Wednesday.

"We could see real improvement in some of the boys even over the course of a few weeks," comments Daryn Pettersen, program director for the summer session. "It was fortunate that we had a large staff

and were able to sit down and talk to the boys one-on-one, and that made a lot of difference. It was also very easy to get to know them and take an interest in them. We could note that the boys looked up to certain counselors and the boys also saw that some of the counselors had previously been through the program and were now giving back to the community."

The boys gave an enthusiastic welcome to guests who spoke at the program, who typically offered insights into the business world. Everyone agreed that the highlight of the summer was the visit by two bodyguards for the star baseball player of the Chicago Cubs, Sammy Sosa.

Even their entrance was high drama. After an introductory 15-minute video on Sosa's homerun heroics, one of the men, who is from the

Dominican Republic, walked down one aisle of the auditorium and on to the stage. The other man, who grew up in the South Bronx and is of Puerto Rican descent, walked down the other aisle, and up on the stage.

Both were muscular, about six feet tall and well dressed in dark suits. After getting past the questions of what Sammy eats, and so on, some of the students started asking more important questions. The men offered their hushed audience practical down-to-earth advice: you don't have to go the drug route, you can set a direction for yourself, you don't have to succumb to peer pressure, you can deal with setbacks.

The formation that Crotona provides extends to the tutors and teachers in the various programs as well. They receive formational talks before they begin their jobs and the formation continues with regular ongoing

training sessions. They learn from the start that their task is twofold--to develop friendships with these young men so they know that someone listens to them and respects and cares for them, and then to motivate the boys to improve academically and personally.

The newly renovated house provides an important boost for a number of related activities, some of which are underway and some of which are planned for the near future, notes Dave Holzweiss, Director of Crotona's sponsor, the South Bronx Educational Foundation.

Among the current programs are: classes on computer literacy and the Internet; the Job Training Program; the Professional Skills Development Program, which brings mature high schoolers together with business professionals to review business case studies and acquire skills for a

demanding summer internship; and the Business Skills Consortium, which strives to supplement the academic and personal development of junior high school, high school, and college students. There are also occasional programs in music and art.

The staff and friends of Crotona and the South Bronx Education Foundation are enthusiastic about the course being set for youths in the South Bronx. And each year the truth of SBEF's motto becomes more clear: "Together We Can!"

For more information, to make a contribution, or to see some of the Crotona students' webpages, visit SBEF's website at www.sbef.org. Or contact:

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