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A Black Baptist Fights the Chicago Archdiocese to Keep a Remarkable High School Open

By Linda Witt

Most educators would have accepted it as inevitable: The Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago had ordered the closing of Providence-St. Mel, the last parochial high school in the city's West Side ghetto. Since the school was created by merger in 1969, its enrollment had shrunk from 1,000 to only 342—all black and 60 percent non-Catholic—and it had gone through more than $1.6 million in church subsidies.

But Providence-St. Mel is no ordinary high school, and Principal Paul J. Adams, 37, is no ordinary administrator. This week, as the archdiocese ends its support of St. Mel, Adams is struggling to prove his own bold contention: "This school could exist in hell if it had air conditioning."

It nearly does that now. Unemployment in the community is close to 40 percent. Gangs prowl the streets. The area's crime rate is among the city's highest. But Adams enforces strict discipline in the school. Students are expelled for cutting class and fined if they walk on the grass. There is no drug problem. "If I even smell a reefer," Adams vows, "everybody in the room is kicked out of school—it's not democratic, but it sure is effective."

Providence-St. Mel's record seems to bear him out. In the last three years a remarkable 95 percent of its graduates—including all but one of this year's 47 seniors—have gone to college. Students must take a course on college opportunities, taught by Adams himself. "By the time my kids are juniors they know everything about getting scholarships," he says. "And if they haven't taken their college boards they don't come back for the senior year. The key thing isn't just to send a kid to college, but to send him where you know he'll get something he can earn a living at 20 years from now."

Adams encourages his students to aim high. "If I hadn't gone to Providence-St. Mel, I would have worked for the city and played basketball," says valedictorian Ronald Price, who received seven college offers and chose Princeton. "Now I'm going to be a corporate attorney and ultimately, I hope, a U.S. senator—so I can help others." Even Adams would settle for less ambitious plans. "Some of these kids used to think the world was the West Side, and that you had to grow up to be a pimp," he says. "At least I've taught them there's more out there than that. But it hasn't been simple."

Keeping the school alive will be even more difficult. With help from concerned parents, Adams and four teachers are setting up a private, nonprofit corporation that has already raised $65,000. Among their

stratagems is a series of free ads, including one in the Wall Street Journal that netted some $23,000. Last week the Chicago Priests Senate defied the archdiocese by voting overwhelmingly to urge public support of the school. Still, $300,000 will be needed to keep it open next year alone, and church officials see no end to the deficits. "Sometimes I think I'm the only real practicing Catholic here—and I'm Baptist," responds an exasperated Adams. "We're still going to be a Catholic school. I just wish they'd encourage us."

With or without official sanction from the archdiocese, Adams has made his commitment. After a divorce in 1974, he set up housekeeping in an 8-by-10 room in a deserted convent next to the school—eliminating the expense of a night watchman's salary. He personally calls the bingo games that last year raised $84,000 for the school, and on weekends he mops floors and cleans the toilets. Students helped him resod the lawn and sandblast the school's once grimy exterior. (To relax, he says, "I take off my shirt and go down to the corner bar to find out what's happening in the neighborhood. The last thing education should do is turn somebody into a snob.")

The son of a Montgomery schoolteacher (widowed when her son was 8), Adams graduated from predominantly black Alabama State in 1962 and earned a master's degree in education at Northern Illinois University. A onetime civil rights activist who was jailed during the 1960 Montgomery sit-ins, he later went into business in Chicago as owner of several Jack in the Box restaurant franchises. "I was married then, I had a nice house, all that upper-middle-class stuff," he says. "But as you get older your values change, and I got the feeling I should help somebody else." In 1971 a friend asked him to fill in as a part-time guidance counselor at Providence-St. Mel. A year and a half later Adams took over as principal.

Though he has a businessman's pragmatism, Adams refuses to be swayed by the dollars-and-cents logic that would shutter his school forever. "The archdiocese says we spend too much per pupil—$1,300 a year, compared to the $900 parochial school average in Chicago. But just imagine what it would cost society if that kid were to spend his life in jail or on welfare." To help offset the loss of church funds, Adams has raised the school's tuition from $550 to $650 a year. Parents will be asked to contribute another $200 in cash or in services.

Even at these prices, the school is an educational bargain, its partisans insist. "We're fighting for a change in society," says Kenneth Campbell, president of the parents' organization. "I'm so tired of picking up the paper and reading about some black child killing another black child. We've got to fight back. And Providence-St. Mel is the best weapon we've found." Adams has been known to use that weapon in unusual ways to motivate his students. "If a kid gets straight A's," he says, "I'll refund his tuition—to him, not his parents. The parents don't earn the grades. I had four straight-A students one quarter and it nearly scared the life out of me. But, hell, I'd rather go under that way than any other."

Teachers say Adams (right) "has had a ripple effect. He cleaned up the school. Now the neighborhood's cleaning itself up."

Cooley High **(above) was filmed at St. Mel in 1974, after Chicago's real Cooley High proved too rough for the movie.**

The senior prom theme, "Stayin' Alive," has become St. Mel's defiant slogan. Students are helping Adams raise funds.