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PROVIDENCE-ST. MEL:

# THE SCHOOL THAT REFUSED TO DIE

Students, staff and parents save an institution

BY RON HARRIS

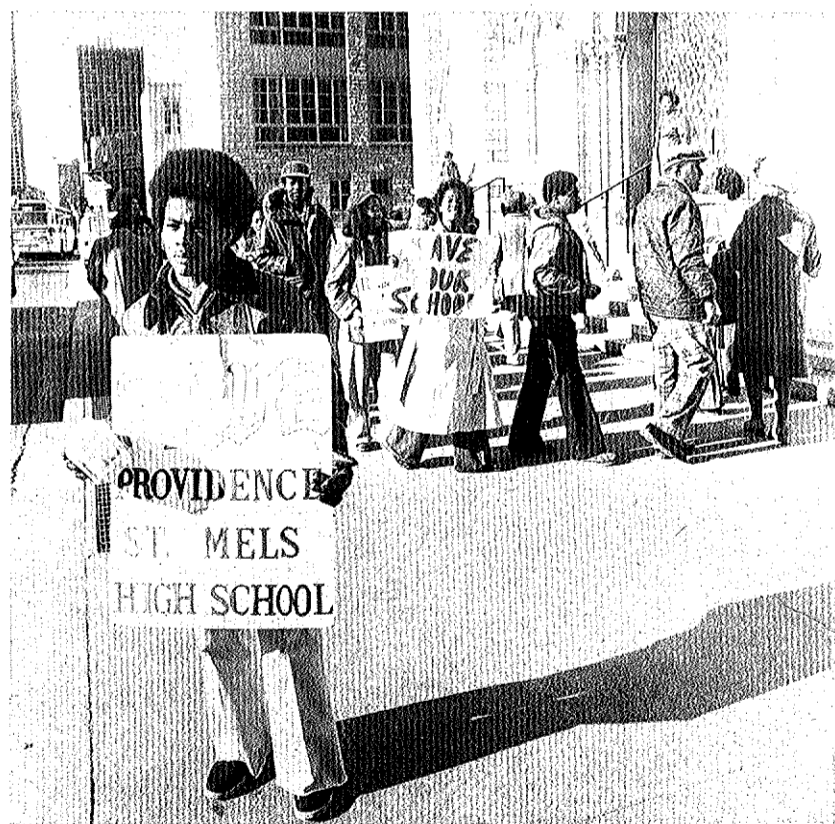
**P**ROVIDENCE-St. Mel High School stands amid the squalor of Chicago's West Side as an educational oasis in the midst of a learning desert. Surrounding the five-story, Gothic structure are crumbling buildings, many being held together by little more than the dreams of those yearning to escape the neighborhood's despair. Every type of drug and 126 bars can be found nearby, unemployment runs to 40 percent, and half the family incomes are below the federal poverty level.

But inside Providence-St. Mel, a learning experience takes place that is equaled by few schools in America, and probably by none functioning in a similar environment. In the last six years, 85 percent of the school's graduates have gone to college, and that impressive figure jumps to 95 percent for the past three years. Though violence and terror are part of the daily routine in the surrounding neighborhood, none exists in the confines of the predominately Black school. There are no drugs in the hall, no spray-can graffiti on the walls,

no locks on school equipment or classroom doors.

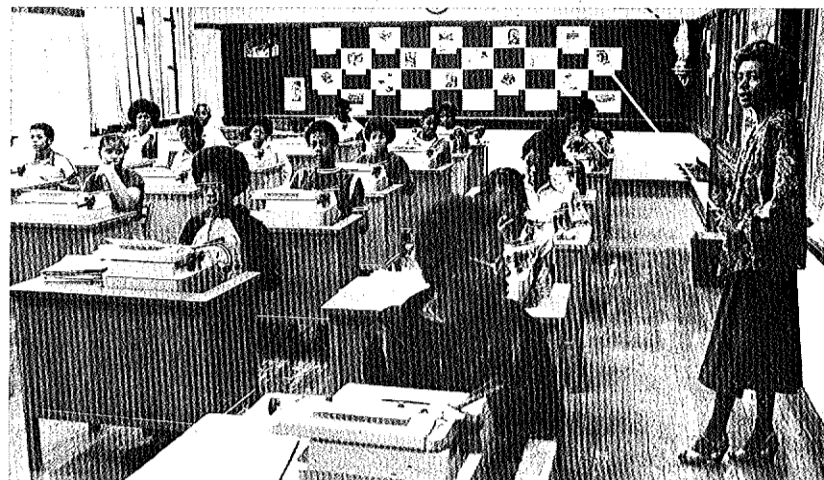
Providence-St. Mel may well be the most remarkable high school in the country. But despite its record of academic excellence and good student deportment, the 49-year-old institution's existence was seriously threatened this year. On Holy Thursday, three days before Easter, the Chicago Archdiocese, the largest Catholic diocese in the U.S. and possibly the richest in the world, told principal Paul Adams it would no longer fund the once all-White school. A number of reasons were listed, including one that the school had failed to raise enough money besides that provided by the archdiocese (although the school had increased outside funding from \$10,000 to \$100,000 since 1973 when the archdiocese first threatened to close the institution unless outside funding was increased). Adams literally begged church officials to reconsider, but they refused. So, last June, the doors of the school were closed, supposedly forever. But they

**The fierce determination of staff, students and parents that enabled Providence-St. Mel to buck the mighty Chicago Archdiocese and stay alive is reflected in the faces of school principal Paul Adams and his students (left) standing in front of the 49-year-old institution. Students (right) joined with parents and staff to raise money to save the school.**





The movie *Cooley High* was filmed at Providence-St. Mel when Chicago's real Cooley High School proved unsuitable for filming. High schoolers (above, left) played by (l. to r.) Corin Rogers, Glynn Turman, Maurice Leon Havis and Lawrence-Hilton Jacobs were a far cry from real-life students (right) who are seriously interested in school work.



"They seem so dedicated to learning," marveled an advisor with the Wisconsin State Department after observing the students in class. Students (left) busily jot down chemistry homework assignment while typing instructor Diane Sawyer (right), one of the school's 16 teachers, explains the fingering on typewriter keyboard to her class.

### THE SCHOOL THAT REFUSED TO DIE *Continued*

didn't stay closed. Parents, teachers and students wouldn't let them. In a massive, four-month fund-raising effort, the staff, students, parents and friends of the embattled institution raised \$160,000—enough to run the school for one year—and on Sept. 5, Providence-St. Mel welcomed 300 students through its doors. The school had refused to die.

That the school could triumph over seemingly insurmountable odds is astonishing. The key to the victory is an extension of an old-fashioned philosophy which guides the remarkable educational process going on inside the gray stone building. "We're always telling our students to try a little harder, to go that extra mile," Principal Adams explains while leaning back in a chair in his spartan office. "So, here comes this thing laying right in our lap that we're not going to be funded next year. We just started practicing what we preach."

And practice they did. First, Adams set the record straight. "When the guy from the archdiocese told me we were going to close, I told him right then and there that we were *not* going to close," Adams says. "He told me I should tell the faculty, and I said, 'You tell them, because as far as I'm concerned we are *not* going to close.' There were enough teachers, parents and students here with enough guts for us to fight this come hell or high water—with the grace of God, because we sure didn't have any money. I was out of town when it broke in the newspapers that we were going to be closed. First thing I did when I got back to Chicago was call an assembly. I told the students quite simply that we had no plans to close. I told them, 'This school will be open next year and we will look forward to seeing you.'"

Next item on the agenda was to make those bold statements stand up by raising the funds needed to continue the school. A corporation, Providence-St. Mel Inc., was formed and \$25,000 was raised in short order with a rally advertised in the Chicago Sun-Times. Another \$25,000 came from Bankers Life & Casualty, and Thompson Distributors, a Black firm in Chicago, kicked in \$20,000. A full-page advertisement in *The Wall Street Journal* headlined, "340 Kids Are About To Learn Hard

Work Isn't Worth A Damn," netted additional funds from businesses.

But most of the money came from ordinary, working class people, some from as far away as Maine, California, Puerto Rico and Belgium. "It was the average people who kept us going," Adams points out. "Sure, we got some big donations from businesses, but it was people mailing in \$5, \$15, or \$50 that allowed us to be here. They would send a letter and it would say something like, 'I don't have much money, but I like what you're doing. Here's \$20.' Stuff like that kept us going."

The survival of Providence-St. Mel says a lot about the people who wanted to see it continue, but it also says a great deal about the school's academic program. Without its record of scholastic achievement it would have merely been one of many Black inner-city schools short of funds—hardly a unique position.

But Providence-St. Mel is unique. While most high schools today are grappling with problems of lack of discipline and falling grades, the school seems to have already found the solution. Adams says the key is not a new educational technique, just the use of simple common sense.

"We're not doing anything magical here," he says rather matter-of-factly. "The only thing we're doing is using common sense. We know that in order to achieve it takes hard work. We expect our students to work hard, and they *have* to work hard if they want to get out of here. We are here for the children to learn. If a class is not learning, you need to fire the teacher. If the school is not progressing, fire the principal. You do whatever it takes to get that child to learn." Combined with Adams' common sense approach are some straight and fast, no-nonsense rules. For instance:

- If anyone is found smoking marijuana anywhere on the school's property, every student in the immediate vicinity is out. Not democratic, but effective. Peer pressure has eliminated drugs at the school.
- If a student cuts one class, the student is fined \$10 and is suspended. In order to be reinstated, the student must return to school with his or her parents.



**No-nonsense rules** initiated by Adams have nearly eliminated discipline problems at the school and won the principal the respect of the students. Students often stop him in the hall (left) for conversation. Those who don't take the rules seriously (right) quickly learn that Adams "doesn't play," one student says.



### THE SCHOOL THAT REFUSED TO DIE *Continued*

- If any school property is stolen, all of the students at the school are held responsible and a collection is taken up to cover the cost of the article unless the real culprit is pointed out.

- If a student leaves the building during school hours without permission, that student is dropped. "What do they need to go out for?" Adams asks. "All the learning is taking place in *here*."

- If a student walks on the school grass, the student is fined \$10. That may sound hard, but it was Adams and students who sodded the lawn.

- If a student is late for class three times, the student is fined \$5.

"Those rules may sound harsh, but they're not," Adams explains. "The students who are here to learn don't mind them at all. Those rules are actually to keep out the students who are not here to learn. This school is a place of business. You come in, take care of your business and leave. Of course, a lot of people disagree with me." However, they certainly couldn't disagree with the results. "You see, we don't have time for a lot of foolishness," Adams continues. "We're in a financial pinch and we're understaffed. It is important that the students understand that and understand what we expect them to do. I don't have time to lock my office each time I go out, or to worry about locking this office or that machine. I don't have time to deal with four or five students every day about tardiness. The staff at this school has too many other things we need to be doing to keep this school alive to be worried about such things. This is a place of learning. We're not high-priced baby sitters.

"What we have done here is change the value system. When I first got here, just getting by with as little work as possible was considered cool. We changed all that. Now it's cool to be on the honor roll." One

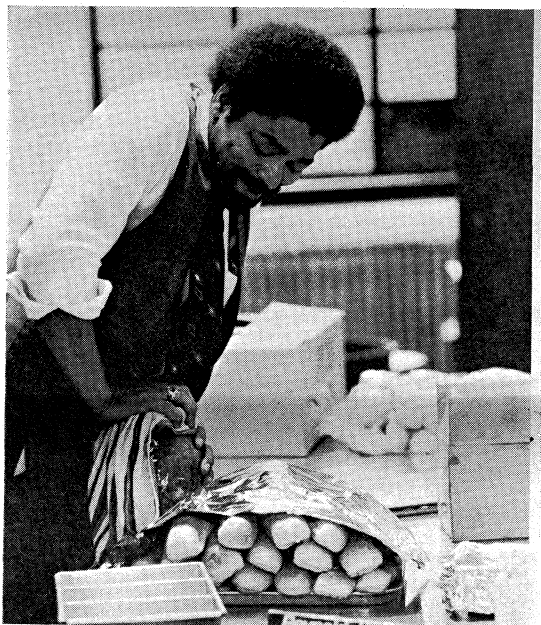
reason being on the honor roll is "cool" is because any student who makes all A's during a quarter is refunded his or her tuition. The check is made out to the student, not the parent. "The parent didn't earn the grades, the student did," Adams explains quickly.

Ironically, Adams, who puts in 10 to 15 hours a day as the school's janitor, gardener and security guard (he lives in the school), never wanted to be principal of Providence-St. Mel. In fact, he still doesn't want the job. While operating a fast food franchise, he came to the school as an interim guidance counselor as a favor for a friend, but the pressure of handling two jobs proved too much for him and he resigned at the end of the school year. But in August the principal of the school called and offered him the top position.

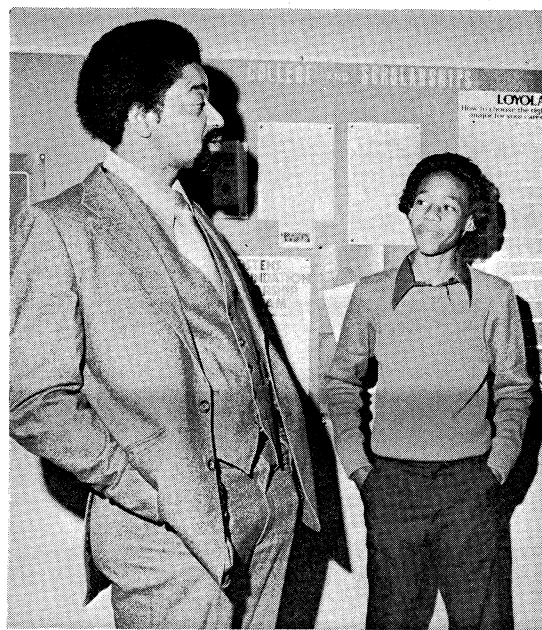
"I said 'No, not enough money,'" Adams recalls, "but I decided to take it on the basis of helping kids. And, besides, I had gotten all the things I needed for my little Black middle-class lifestyle. I've been here seven years now, seven years too long. I hadn't expected to be here but two years when I started, but every time I got ready to leave a crisis came up. First there was the talk about closing the school in 1973, and now this. Looks like I'll end up being caught here for another two or three years."

The staff and students at Providence-St. Mel have won one battle, but they have yet to win the war. They still need money. Because of the financial pinch, staff members often handle jobs outside their regular duties. It is not uncommon to see an instructor lecturing a student in the lunchroom about the correct answers on yesterday's assignment and then walk into the kitchen to join other teachers preparing the day's lunch.

One instructor quipped while dishing out hot roast beef sandwiches,



**Lack of funds** has forced Adams (above) and his staff to double as cooks. At top center, typing instructor Diane Sawyer and Judith Spears, an English instructor, prepare roast beef sandwiches for lunch while reading instructor Mary Taylor (bottom right) serves hot dogs to hungry students. Teachers volunteer this double duty.



**Honor student Robert Davis**, a senior who aspires to a medical career, discusses his plans for college with Adams during a break in classes. All students are required to take a battery of college entrance exams in junior-senior years and to apply to three colleges. In past three years, 94 percent have gone to college.



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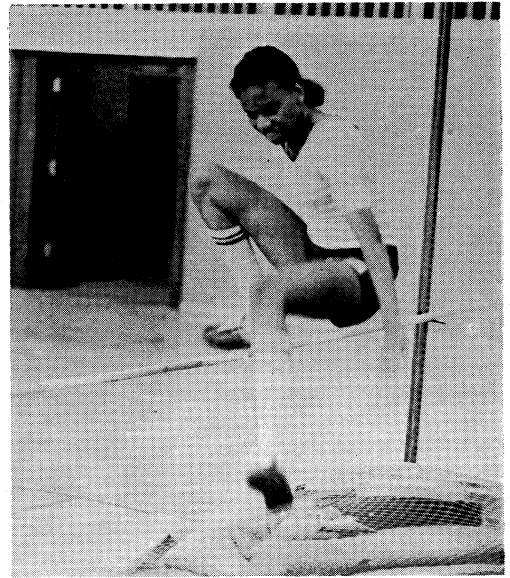
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**Leaping high**, a student (right) practices the scissor-kick in the high jump while classmates (below) do calisthenics. Athletics, including track and field, tennis, basketball and bowling, are vital to curriculum.



## THE SCHOOL THAT REFUSED TO DIE *Continued*

"If I ever lost this job, I can always get one as a cook," Adams says of his staff, "The teachers have learned that this is not just a job, it's a way of life."

The students understand the plight of their school. They manned the front line to save the school when it was slated for extinction and continue to run many of its present fund-raising events. Indicative of this attitude, the senior prom theme was "Stayin' Alive." "Students know what they are expected to do, and they just do it," says Derrick Powell, 16, a junior. "It's hard here. I could go to an easier school, but I believe that when you take the easy way you suffer in the long run."

Adams remains as adamant as ever about the survival of the school. "We didn't go through all this work just for one year," he says. To keep the money coming in, he conducts bingo games three days a week and disco dances twice a month to supplement mail-in contributions. Whether Providence-St. Mel will survive remains to be seen. Even Adams admits he is seriously worried. But if the progress of the last six years can be used as an indicator of what the future holds, the school should make it.

**Providence-St. Mel stands tall** amid the dilapidated housing on Chicago's West Side. An estimated \$250,000 is needed to repair the 49-year-old building, presently being bought by the school from the order, The Sisters of Providence.

