

West Side story

Residents celebrate inspiration, education, educator

By Catey Sullivan

"These kids don't say 'this is what I want to be when I grow up.' They say 'this is what I want to be if I grow up.'"

Hinsdale resident Jackie Bingham is talking about a group of children celebrated at a recent benefit for Chicago's Providence-St. Mel School.

"My overwhelming impression the first day I drove there was that I was terrified," Bingham, a board member of the school, continued. "I remember driving through west side thinking, 'what have I gotten myself into?'"

Washington Post reporter and 1978 Providence-St. Mel graduate John Fountain came to the school from a different angle, from a home in the North Lawndale neighborhood where he and his sisters used to eat slices of bread with ketchup as a special treat.

"Sometimes people look at me and say, you could never have become a killer or a gang banger and I say yes, I could have. Easily," Fountain said.

Providence-St. Mel is something Fountain, Bingham and several hundred others recently gathered in the grand ballroom of Chicago's Hyatt Regency share in common.

The occasion was a tribute to Paul J. Adams III, current president of the school's board of trustees and principal of the school from 1971 through 1996.

The school that drew Fountain as a student and Bingham as a volunteer sits at 119 S. Central Park Blvd. The address is in the heart of Chicago Police District No. 11, one of the most violent neighborhoods in the United States. The area's unemployment rate has been pegged at roughly 40 percent.

West on the Eisenhower, one gets to the school from the Independence Avenue exit, seven ramps west of the end of the Congress Expressway where blinking signs on the Auditorium Theater advertise \$70 tickets to "Showboat."

For the past 18 years, every single one of the school's graduates have gone to college. The school has 700 students in grades one through 12, all of them African American. It has come within a breath of shutting down more than once.

"We thought we were going to be the last graduating class," Fountain said. In 1978, the Archdiocese of Chicago decided to cut off funding and close the building.

Providence-St. Mel now exists on private donations,

volunteers like Bingham and Hinsdale Financial Service's executive Donald Blaha and corporate contributions from companies like Hinsdale's Productivity Point International and Westmont's Rainbow Press.

It is Adams who cements the efforts together, according to testimony given over dinner in the Hyatt ballroom last month.

"In this school, Paul has created an amazing place. Once it grips you, it will not let you go," school board member Karen Pritzger told a packed room of students, alumni, volunteers and teachers.

Bingham made her first trip to the school in 1992 with her husband and a business associate who had been invited to an awards ceremony for students.

"The enthusiasm among the kids was incredible," Bingham recalled. "As the awards were given out, each child would come join the others on the stage. At the end, Paul looked out at the kids left in the audience and told them, 'Next time, I want to see you up here.'"

Bingham met with Adams after the ceremony.

"He told us the story of the school and my reaction was immediate. I was ready to do anything," Bingham said.

A youth in Montgomery, Ala., Adams was primed for a life of determination by his participation in the 1955 bus boycotts, freedom marches and protests.

Those events were spearheaded by the Montgomery Improvement Society under the direction of a young Martin Luther King, a nearby neighbor to Adams' family.

After earning several degrees in education, Adams was recruited in 1971 by Providence-St. Mel. He started as a guidance counselor. By 1972, he was the school's principal.

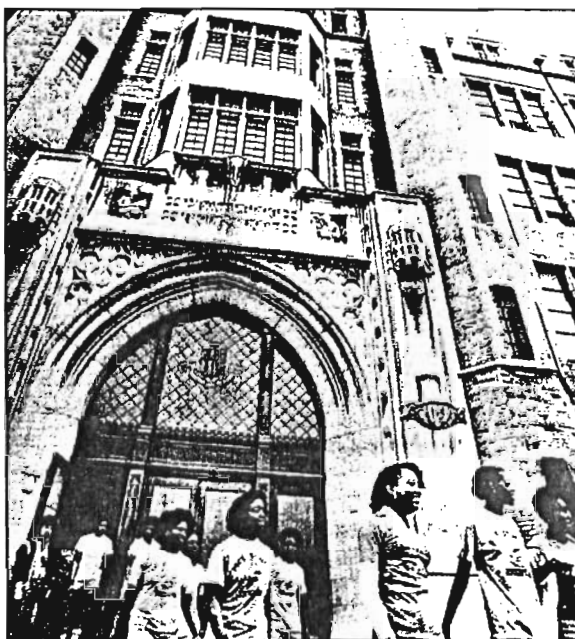
That job involves more than traditional education, according to graduates and educators speaking at the dinner:

"When pipes at the school burst in the winter, Adams dons hip waders and heads into the boiler room at dawn to get the place up and running."

When the grass needs mowing, Adams does it himself and then hands out \$10 fines to anybody who walks on it.

Students who abuse drugs are expelled. Students who skip class are dismissed. When students wear trousers that Adams thinks are too baggy, he hitches them up.

"There is no slacking off. No disrespect. No excuses," Fountain said. Fountain was 13 when he enrolled at the school from what he describes a world



Several area volunteers work together with educators to give students at Providence-St. Mel School the best education possible.

of darkness. "I hated poverty. I hated what I saw to it do to the people around me. I hated the drugs and I hated the gun shots in the middle of the night, every night," he said.

"What I remember from before I got to Providence-St. Mel's is a lot of darkness, darkness that consumes the heart of the north Lawndale neighborhood."

"Out in that dark right now is a little boy on the verge of becoming a statistic," he said.

Statistics were a cold reality in the early 1990s when Bingham helped students start up "The Knightly News," the student newspaper.

"Every year, it seems like one of the students dies, whether it's through a random drive by or a shooting or some kind of cross fire. These are children living in incredible circumstances," Bingham said.

"I don't think there's a kid at that school that doesn't have an incredible story behind them."

"Working with these children you can't help but get a deeper understanding of what they are up against."

"What it's done for me is put me in their shoes, a little, instead of always looking at it from the outside," she said.

Although she had substitute taught in Hinsdale, Bingham didn't know much about newspapers when she signed up to oversee the first issue of "The Knightly News" several years ago.

Then, the school had a few

computers and some software, but no coordination between the two. Bingham taped up posters inviting students to join the news staff and called a friend with computer expertise. After laying out the first issue, Rainbow Press donated the services to get it printed, Bingham said.

At the same time, Timothy Preheim, chief executive officer of the 16-year-old Hinsdale firm Productivity Point International, was stepping up his involvement with the school.

"A mutual friend told me about the school. Paul Adams and I met face to face and hit it off right away. So we (at Productivity Point International) decided to make our whole staff available on an as-needed basis to the school," Preheim said.

"We helped them plan their wiring considerations, equipment purchases and laid out how to train the teachers and administrators," he said. Like Bingham, Preheim is now on the board of trustees for the school.

"Paul, I think, is a visionary in the world of education," he added.

The students currently attending Providence-St. Mel say they also see something extraordinary about Adams and their school.

"We believe in the creation of inspired lives here," seventh grader Brannon Young told benefit attendees. "Inspired lives. I think about that every morning."