

“A LIFE EVER RENEWED”: CLAUDINE’S 21st –CENTURY MISSION TO GIRLS ON THE MARGINS

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1. Introduction

This reflection celebrates another anniversary for the Congregation: in April 2017, the Washington School for Girls, in Washington, DC, celebrated twenty years of educational ministry. The school motto, “In the Spirit of Courageous Women,” is inspired by the stories of three courageous and faith-filled women, Claudine Thévenet, Cornelia Connelly and Mary McLeod Bethune. Their stories have provided the spiritual foundation of the school. The women’s groups they founded -- the Religious of Jesus and Mary, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, and the National Council of Negro Women have collaborated and supported the mission of the school since its creation. I was one of three women from each of the organizations who were partners working together to begin the school, known for the first 16 years as the Washington Middle School for Girls.ⁱ

The school is located in Anacostia, “the other Washington,” a reality different from the nation’s capital city seen on TV and in the media. It was in this southeast section of the city that the black freed slaves of the nineteenth century were first housed. Providing cheap labor, they were the workforce to build some of the imposing edifices in the city, including the Capitol and the White House. Over time, the lingering legacy of slavery continued to plague this African-American community, who were eventually granted the status of citizen, only to confront the evils of modern racism and exclusion from the privileges and goods of America. The current troubling statistics of unemployment, teen pregnancy, school dropouts, and homelessness tell the story of a radical divide in this urban metropolis that continues to this day.ⁱⁱ There is little doubt that the proximity of this community to a world seat of wealth and power, combined with its lack of access to its fair share has fueled the violence so prevalent to this day.

The mission of the school is to seek out and find young girls who are at risk of not completing school and to provide them with high quality, faith-based education. At first the

work began as an afterschool program. We gathered twelve girls from the area in the basement of an apartment building. The school has grown into two separate campuses, with classes from Grades 3 through 8. Total enrollment is 150 in order to foster individual attention and progress. For its 230 graduates, the school has a support program through secondary education, a critical period for these children. Small classes, an extended school day and a longer school year are complemented by a variety of remedial and auxiliary social and educational services. As a tuition-free independent Catholic school, the school must raise all its own funds. It is not subsidized by any government or diocesan funds.ⁱⁱⁱ

The following anecdote captures the heart of the mission of WSG.

An eighth-grader returning from the annual overnight retreat, expressed her experience in these words: “It was on this retreat that we learned that we are all sisters.” “I mean it, she repeated, “we are all sisters!” She went on to recount the sharing among the students and staff, the activities that built trust, moments of silent prayer that all spoke to her of a God who was “watching out for her.” She came back with new knowledge: she is truly loved by God and by others and has an equal place in this group and in this world.

The realization of this student has special meaning for me. Her family had been the topic of articles in *The Washington Post* that exposed her family’s poverty: the violence and drug abuse leading to her removal from her own family. The articles highlighted the failed system of social services offered to her family; but this only increased her feelings of isolation and degradation.

Accounts like these highlight an important challenge we face in educating the poor and marginalized – the radical transformation needed in persons and in institutions. This is similar to the challenge Claudine faced as she undertook her early foundation. I am always returning to the questions: How did Claudine take in “the weakest, the most shameful” young girls and offer a corrective experience to heal the wounds of their poverty? How did she prepare young women to take their place as confident, contributing members of their society? What was her driving passion? How can we do the same today? I would like to suggest four approaches in our changing educational ministry.

2. Giving Preference to the Poor

“Her priority in selecting children for her providences was always clear: the weakest and most abandoned were to be preferred. Claudine reserved the task of first care and clean-up of each new girl for herself, reminding others that soon “she will be lovely when she is eighteen” (*Positio*, 574).

Disorder, competition, greed and violence ruled the streets of post-Revolutionary Lyon. In the face of that Claudine’s imagination led her to look outward. The plight of the most vulnerable-- young girls abandoned to the streets --captured her heart. “The lot of those thousands of poor little children, deprived of this world’s goods, who were destined to grow up perhaps without ever hearing the name of God, made her tremble.” (*Positio*, 540).

We chose to open our school in the Anacostia section of DC. Many encouraged us to start the school in a “more central” and “successful” section of the city, but we maintained our commitment to seek an area of greatest need. After many trials and much searching, we were introduced to a property developer who provided the first two rooms in a low-income apartment building. It wasn’t well placed socially, but it was the perfect site: the neighborhood of those we came to serve.

The plight of young girls in this area is a hidden one. Girls don’t often make the news because not many of them are involved in street crime or violent behavior. A number become pregnant, leave school prematurely, and passively accept whatever the future brings. This satisfaction with the “status quo” has devastating consequences for the individual girls. Beyond that, it perpetuates the cycle of poverty, because some of these same girls become mothers while they are still children.

Many of the students we admit are well below their grade level academically. They have often lost relatives to street violence or endured the separation of an incarcerated parent or sibling. Some have seen brothers arrested or shot before their eyes. In the most extreme cases, the students themselves have been shot. In a tragic incident one of our girls was killed on her way home from school, caught up in gunfire not intended for her. Our “little ones” are among those whom Claudine would recognize and welcome.

We began the recruitment process for the school by contacting adults working in local churches, police stations, schools, and children’s programs. Did they know of any young girls who were full of promise, but who were on the way to drop out of school? We went to places

where the mothers of potential students could be found: hairdressers, nail salons, and food distribution centers. We were seeking students who were not seeking us.

As we recruited students, we were careful to involve the families. It is essential that someone be able to offer encouragement. When there is no parent available to lend support at WSG, we seek an adult relative or friend of family who can supply that support. Claudine recognized this need and provided sponsors for girls whose parents were deceased or unable to help her. No student is denied admittance to our school because her parents did not cooperate.

3. Growing Together in Knowledge of God

“Beneath the external squalor and misery that so moved her, lay the spiritual dereliction that most touched her heart: the inner destitution and deprivation of those who would live and die, perhaps, without ever knowing God.” (*Spiritual Profile*, 18)

A suffering and crucified God entered Claudine’s heart when she heard the death wish of her brothers: “forgive . . . as we forgive.” This command inspired her life of apostolic desire to make known the goodness of God. Claudine gave clear priority to teaching faith and morals. She urged her associates in the Section for Instruction to act with gentleness and patience to overcome the awkward ways and ignorance of their pupils, in order to imprint in their souls a deep love of religion. She stressed joyful communication of the Gospel message because “it easily leads others to God.” (*Rule of Pious Association*, Title 7, Arts. 4 and 5).

The decision to establish the WSG as an independent Catholic School was made with attention and sensitivity to the diverse faith backgrounds of the students. Some students are raised in a rich spiritual evangelical Christian tradition. Others are basically “unchurched,” and have had very little exposure to religion. Very few are Roman Catholic. Daily classes in religion focus on scripture, morals, and the celebration of liturgical feasts. A daily prayer assembly led by the students provides the opportunity for them to ask God’s blessing on the work of the day, voice their personal concerns, and celebrate birthdays and friendship. They are joyous preludes to each day.

The practice of reflection (Examen) is essential to the formation of students. Twice a day, the entire student body stops for a few minutes to reflect on God’s action in the “here and now” of their lives. This version of the Ignatian Examen has proven to be one of the favorite practices of both students and faculty.

Regular retreats are planned to accommodate various levels of maturity. The third grade has a special day on campus; upper grades go away from campus for a day. The eighth grade has a two-day overnight experience. Activities are planned during retreat days that integrate the social & emotional development of young girls. Many recall the experience of bonding and friendship during retreats as one of their favorite experiences at WSG.

The teaching of faith would not be complete without including an integral service component. The students of WSG do not think of themselves as “poor.” They might explain, “I have a roof over my head while others are out on the street.” Through a number of small collections, students contribute in their own ways to alleviate the plight of those who have less than they, in our own nation and beyond its borders. An experience of partnership that has been powerful for our girls involves students from an affluent private school, who join the WSG students in a service project for the homeless. This offers a setting with new and unlikely peers as the two groups together serve a common need. The experience creates a new awareness for each of the groups.

4. True Empowerment: A Transformative Curriculum with a Practical Aim

“Once, the sister portress brought in a puny, unattractive ten-year-old who had just arrived, and said in a demeaning tone, ‘What can you expect us to do with this child, Reverend Mother?’ ‘Leave her alone, replied Mother St. Ignatius pleasantly as she looked at the new arrival. ‘You will see how lovely she will be at eighteen!’” (Adapted excerpt, *Positio*, 574).

Through the establishment of providences, Claudine offered a complete educational experience that set the girls on a path to economic independence. She knew that the earlier they came into that empowering environment and the longer they stayed, the better their overall formation would be.

Beyond “the basics” for workers’ children of that era, there was careful promotion from skill to skill -- from mending, to needlework, and finally to the most marketable skill, that of silk weaving. Lyon was still considered “the city of silk” and that industry continued to thrive well into the nineteenth century. Claudine settled for nothing less than the highest quality of work from the girls. Their products were sold to some of the most demanding manufacturers, and her Providence at Fourvière came to be known as one of the best in the city. She wanted each girl to leave the providence having the knowledge, skills, and competency to make it in that world. Even after they left, she worked to see that they were placed in safe and profitable environments. (*Letters of Claudine*, 1977, 21).

A primary goal of the WSG program is to provide remedial educational and enrichment experiences, along with exposure to diverse opportunities. We want the girls to imagine a future for themselves that they may not yet see. Like Claudine, we hope they leave the school with education and skills needed to pursue their dreams for the future.

The longest part of the day is given to core academic subjects, whereas the last two hours are dedicated to enrichment activities that promote leadership skills, exposure to career opportunities and the development of the unique talents of each girl. Several community organizations help us provide the girls with projects like international cooking, business and financial management, the practice of law, and sports. A special partnership with prestigious fine arts programs (dance, music and visual arts) rounds out the curriculum for this “Extended Day Program.”

Because success and achievement are important, we face a special challenge. How do we help each girl grow toward her full potential without causing discouragement? We need to name and reward success carefully. Tests are used to measure growth rather than grade level or status. Monthly “Courage Awards” are given to students for effort and/or improvement in attitude. The highest school honor, “In the Spirit Award,” is given at graduation to the student who has defied unusual odds and challenges, and yet has persisted with courage in her education. Students eligible for this award include those who have been evicted from a home, separated from family, or defied activity in “gangs.”

The WSG team includes a Family Relations Coordinator who focuses her energy on students who have problems with uniform regulations, chronic tardiness, completing homework assignments, or other behavioral infractions. She sets up home visits and special meetings with parents or caregivers, emphasizing trust rather than guilt. Because of increased Web-based communication and instruction, this coordinator seeks donors to provide computers and Internet access for each family.

Parents are required to engage in learning activities with their daughters outside of school time. The coordinator supplies a list of suggested activities in the larger community: visits to museums, libraries and reading activities, to name a few. These activities reawaken educational dreams in families; a number of mothers have returned to school to pursue their education.

The Graduate Support Program strives to ensure the success of students even after they leave WSG. Beginning in the 7th grade, students are introduced to academic, social, and practical issues they will face in the transition to secondary school and beyond. Many will encounter a new socioeconomic environment that may give rise to feelings of not belonging and insecurity. These future challenges are presented in a relaxed setting so that students and mentors may discuss and role-play how to maintain confidence and seek assistance in unfamiliar situations.

Reunions, retreats and service opportunities are organized to continue the formation of students even after they leave WSG. Graduates often return to WSG to work as aids during their breaks. “It is like coming home,” said one of them.

5. Seeking Partners in Mission: A Collaborative Spirit

“Father André Coindre addressed the question of survival for the (Pious) Association by referring to the bonds of union that were already so strong. In a stirring voice, he proposed *“that the Society be united by permanent bonds to the Community of the Ladies of Fourvière ... thus assuring its survival by affiliating it to a work it is hoped will last forever”* (Pious Association Meeting of May 31, 1821).

Claudine knew how to make relationships work for her and her “little ones”! From the moment that Father Coindre appeared with the two poor children, she realized that only together with others could she provide the care they needed. She reached out to family and friends to provide temporary lodging and needed funds. Once the Pious Association was under way, it was clear that this was a community of friends in partnership for mission to the “weakest, most forsaken” of Lyon’s poor. They offered financial resources and lodgings; they hired the Sisters of St. Joseph to set up and staff a little providence. It is clear that Claudine was not an isolated leader. “Together with some of her friends, she sought a solution to remedy this great misfortune” (*Positio*, 540). Claudine’s enterprising spirit, good management skills, and her capacity to attract others to the mission created a bedrock for future sustainable development.

The spirit of collaboration of the three organizations that marked the origin of our school has been a hallmark of its development. Over the years, numerous organizations and individuals have partnered in the mission to provide these young girls with quality education. Nurturing relationships among volunteers and collaborating organizations results in additional capacities for fundraising, a reduction in cost, and most importantly, better opportunities for our students.

The school owns no property, but each of the campuses is situated in a location that complements the mission of the school. The campus of the youngest students (3rd through 5th grades) is situated on the grounds of the first parish established by black Catholics in the Diocese in June 20, 2008, when the segregation of races in the Catholic Church was still the norm. The students join the women of the church in spiritual and service-based programs. They are invited to celebrations that expose them to the rich traditions of the African American community, such as a “proper tea”, a concert with gospel music, and celebrations of civil rights organizers. They occasionally serve at a local food pantry or make sandwiches for the homeless in the area.

THEARC campus is part of a collaborative structure that includes satellite campuses of prestigious organizations in Washington, including visual arts, music, dance, medicine, and athletics. Without draining school finances, students have ready access to opportunities at little or no cost to them or their families. There are monthly meetings with THEARC partners for communication, collaborative planning, and discussion of neighborhood concerns.

Because WSG is not eligible for government or church support, the contributions of individuals and foundations comprise the major part of our funding and make the mission possible. When donors visit, student led tours demonstrate student leadership, pride, and “ownership” of their school. It is not unusual for donors to leave in wonder and in tears, having listened to one of our girls articulate her hopes for a future with personal grace and feeling. A number of our financial donors have become volunteers and are enriched by time spent with our students.

As a reminder of the need to foster the original spirit of the school, the governing board has established a “Founding Spirit Committee.” It is composed of members of each of the three founding organizations along with selected members of the faculty and staff. This committee has the task of maintaining and sharing the inspiring stories of each of the three courageous women who embodied the founding spirit, and ensure that the education at WSG reflects fidelity to the school’s mission.

The WSG school community gathers at the beginning of each day to pray, ”in honor of our Founding Spirits”: to forgive as Claudine Thévenet forgave that we might answer violence and hatred with love and compassion; to reverence others as Cornelia Connelly did, that we might see and honor your presence in all people; to cherish education as Mary McLeod Bethune did that we might work together to bring about a peaceful and just world.”

Looking back over these twenty years, we are happy that the future leadership of the school is now in the hands of committed laity as we, Religious of Jesus and Mary, join with them and other women religious to support and guide this mission. Two centuries after Claudine undertook her labors in the streets of post-revolutionary Lyon, France, her charismatic gifts have found new expression in the neglected neighborhoods of Washington DC. Two decades of service at WSG share the legacy of those 200 years, together with countless other streams of grace and goodness that have their sources on the “praying hill” of Fourvière. And who knows what is yet to spring forth in the future? “The Spirit that guided the beginnings of the Congregation continues today, through the same charismatic grace, to well up within it a life that is ever renewed.” (*Constitutions*, Art 12)

In the Spirit of Courageous Women,

Happy Anniversary!

NOTES

ⁱ Cornelia Connelly (1809–1878), a wealthy convert to Catholicism from Philadelphia, was a married woman who experienced deep sorrow when one of her young children died of accidental burns in her arms. Later she suffered abrupt and painful separation from her husband, who wanted to become a Catholic priest, and left her alone with the children. In spite of her difficulties and struggles, she became the much-loved founder of the Society of the Holy Child, a congregation of women religious, in 1846. Invited to England to begin Catholic educational services, Cornelia first began a school for mill girls and poor children in Derby. For additional information visit <https://shcj.org>.

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955), born in the south to poor tenant farmers, former slaves a decade after the end of the Civil War, would devote her life to ensuring the right to education and freedom from discrimination for African- Americans. Her immense faith in God led her to believe that no task was impossible. She was known as a tireless educator, author, and civil rights activist. She defied racism through her works of charity and social organizing. One of the first women of color to advise to every president from Coolidge to Roosevelt, she began a school for African American girls that would eventually become Bethune Cookman College. For additional information, see “Mary McLeod Bethune Council House.” National Park Service, at <https://www.ncnw.org>

ⁱⁱ The public high school graduation rate in the southeast section of DC is 58%. At the neighborhood Anacostia High School it is only 42%. In Southeast DC, a staggering 46% of children live in poverty (71% of all poor children in the city live in this section). Unemployment is nearly double that of the rest of the city (19%). The violent crime rate is 58% higher than the rest of city and the teen pregnancy rate has improved but is still at 19%.

ⁱⁱⁱ For additional information about the school, see the website: <https://www.washingtonschoolforgirls.org>.

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For the abiding support of the RJM of my local community during the earliest days of the school when all seemed impossible, my lasting thanks. To all the RJM, our partners in mission, and so many others who continue to support this ministry, may we together “journey with Claudine” into the future God is shaping for us.