

Catherine's Miracles

Asbury Park, New Jersey (USA) was once a thriving, lively, seashore resort destination, about sixty miles south of New York City on the Atlantic coast. Today, it is a small city that has fallen on hard times. The tourists stay away because of the crime rate, the shuttered buildings and the all too frequent street violence that keeps most people indoors once the sun goes down.

The Sisters Academy of New Jersey, founded by Mercy Sister Carol Ann Henry and sponsored by the Mid-Atlantic Community of the Sisters of Mercy, is located in a run-down area of Asbury Park. It is a middle school for girls aged 10 to 14 years, who come from difficult social and economic circumstances. I am the Principal of the Sisters Academy.

Recently, I was sitting in my office when several of our graduates, now sophomores and juniors in local Catholic high schools in the area, came in, sat down, and began talking – among themselves really, but I couldn't help but overhear their discussion.

One of the girls was wearing a medal. Someone asked her what it was. "It's a medal of Saint John Neumann," she said, and then went on to tell everyone who he was and what he had done in nineteenth-century America. This led to a discussion about saints.

"Aren't they trying to make Pope John Paul II a saint?" one of the girls asked me. "Yes," I said, "they are. He was just beatified."

"Don't you have to have miracles to be a saint?" asked another of the girls. "Yes," I said, "you usually need at least two miracles, and then those miracles have to be independently confirmed by outside people, usually doctors, to make sure they are real."

There was a lull in the conversation.

Then one of the girls asked, "Aren't we trying to have Catherine McAuley made a saint?" "Yes," I said, "that's why we pray to her so we can attribute a miracle to her."

There was another short silence, and then one of the girls looked around at her seven other friends sitting with her and said, "What about us? What about all our Sisters who went before us? Aren't we Catherine's miracles? There are hundreds of us, a lot more than just two! If it wasn't for Catherine McAuley, where would we be? We would never have the education we have. We wouldn't be where we are today."

The city in which they live is Asbury Park. It is one of the poorest cities in New Jersey and it is densely populated. There are over 18,000 people living in one square mile. The public school system has an eighty-five percent pupil failure rate. There are public housing complexes; rampant drug use and dealing; AIDS and sexually transmitted

diseases are high on the index of diseases plaguing its residents; gangs roam the streets; and, guns, gunfire and shootings are a way of life.

All the girls of the Sisters Academy have stories. They are from broken homes, single-parent homes, and homes where there are no mothers or fathers. Some of our girls have been abused physically and/or sexually. From the windows of the Academy classrooms, some of our girls can see their biological mothers walking the streets as drug addicts, drug dealers, and/or prostitutes. Some girls' fathers and/or mothers are in prison. We have girls living in motels because they are homeless. Some of our girls have had their biological mothers and fathers disown them and they are being raised by aunts or grandmothers. In spite of all of this, most of our girls thrive. They know they are loved and they feel safe in the Academy community.

Our girls engage in a rigorous academic program in which, in addition to normal academic subjects, they are also exposed to a variety of educational, artistic, cultural, social, and extracurricular activities. If our girls have the grades and they are accepted into either one of the two local Catholic high schools, Sisters Academy helps pay for their high school tuition. Our experience has shown us that we walk with our girls not just the four years they are with us, but for the four years they are in high school, and, with some of them, we also walk with them for the four years they are in college.

Many of our graduates, who have graduated from college, are now in the workforce or are pursuing advanced degrees.

I am constantly amazed by the graduates of Sisters Academy, and have been since the first day I met these amazing young women. But, ever since that conversation in my office, I look at our graduates, and the girls who are currently in our care, differently. Now, every day, I see living, breathing miracles of Catherine McAuley walking the halls of our school – and into the streets of our world.

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