



Monks in the Inner City

http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/topic/excellence_in_philanthropy/briefly_noted75

Poverty. Unemployment. Billions of dollars spent on schooling with dismal results. The seventh highest murder rate in the United States. Newark, New Jersey, is afflicted. Yet amidst all this there is an oasis of school success. While most of the city's students never even finish high school, St. Benedict's Prep, a 146-year-old school serving 550 low-income minority boys, boasts a nearly 100 percent college acceptance rate. And it's run by monks.



Monks at St. Benedict's Prep. (Bongiorno Productions Inc.)

Their secret? The monks say they recognized long ago that “inner-city kids need special elements not found in traditional schools.” And many of these elements are spelled out in a 1,500-year old monastic manual, the Rule of St. Benedict, that the sixth-century Italian monk codified to guide his monastic order. In the new documentary *The Rule: Want Inner City Schools to Finally Succeed?*, which premiered on PBS in September, husband and wife filmmakers Jerome and Marylou Bongiorno give us an inside look.

Many of the students come from broken families and have significant emotional issues. “It’s ludicrous for you to continue to talk about algebra or English when a kid’s got a broken heart,” says one monk. So these needs are addressed. One of St. Benedict’s Prep’s most potent intervention tools is Leahy House, where boys can stay to stabilize their living environment, silence outside noise, and focus on their internal needs. Another program for personal development: Freshmen embark on a five-day, 58-mile Appalachian Trail hike, where they learn camping skills, living in community, persistence, and the maturity required to be a man.

There are no metal detectors at St. Benedict’s, no school bells, no locks on the lockers. Assemblies, homeroom, and other aspects of the school day are student-led. In a city culture where the monks say no connection between hard work and success is present, these boys are learning otherwise. As self-proclaimed “monk in the ’hood” Brother Patrick Winbush says, “when young men come to St. Benedict’s Prep, they’re not just coming to any old school, they are coming to a monastery. And they learn the Benedictine values—because they need it.”