

## The New St. Martin DePorres Comes Home

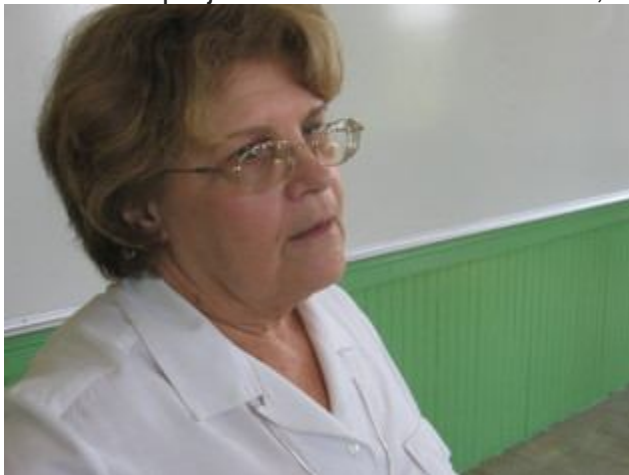
The St. Martin de Porres Academy — or SMPA, as it is called- is a new type of school in Connecticut. It follows a Jesuit model called the nativity school. It is dedicated to serving poor kids, reaching them at the critical middle school years. It provides small classes, a rigorous eleven hour day, mandatory summer instruction, a spiritual foundation, and mentorship all the way through high school to get the kids into college.

And it does all this without charging any tuition whatsoever beyond a \$20 per-month activity fee. About 77 percent of the families are headed by single parents. Most of the families who qualify for federal free lunch programs, that is, low income, can apply, and the parents must sign a contract for service and involvement with the school. The kids wear uniforms too, khaki pants and polo shirt tops.

The nativity model — there are now 64 schools nationally, with one to open in Rwanda and another in the Czech Republic — has been a success story nationally. Some 80 percent of the students going on to college.

Locally SMPA, founded two years ago, by, among others John Crawford (pictured), a local business executive, has outgrown its first space in Hamden. Now it is happily moving back to the Hill, where many of the low-income middle-school kids SMPA serves live.

For decades a St. Martin DePorres School operated in the Dixwell neighborhood, by the old Elm Haven projects. Unlike the new version, that was affiliated with a nearby church.



The principal of the new school, Mary Surowiecki, taught geography and English in this very building when it was Sacred Heart/Saint Peter in the 1970s. Amid the frenzy of refitting and repainting the school, several board members were observed carrying paint cans and doing the hands-on contracting. (They refused to be photographed; it's that kind of place, where service is modeled from the top down.) They're preparing for SMPA's 80 incoming 5th to 8th graders, up from 47 last year.

The principal, after touring the room where she had taught 30 years ago and which was now being repainted pesto green, took a break to sit down along with Crawford, pictured

below, and administrative assistant Maria Moore, doing the welcoming in the photo at the top. They talked about what makes SMPA unique and what makes it tick.

**NHI:** First of all, SMPA is a Catholic school, is it not?

**MS:** Oh, absolutely. But it's independent, which means that we have no affiliation to a particular church or the diocese.

**NHI:** So how do you come to be in this building?



**MS:** The Catholic schools in New Haven are not all doing so well. The tuition here at Sacred Heart was \$2,200, which was very dear for these poor families. Enrollment plummeted. That's what's happening in other places in New Haven, where the public schools take over old Catholic school buildings. The diocese is renting us this building for one dollar. That's a good deal.

**NHI:** Do you have to be Catholic to go here?

**MS:** No, the nativity model is that we provide nurturing education to poor kids regardless of race, religion, color, or ethnicity. You just have to be poor! And your family must be committed to our 11-hour day, to the ideals of the school, which include a sense of service, non violence, mediation, and development of a moral character. That's all!

**NHI:** What other features would you cite as unique?

**MS:** Well, maybe not unique, but the model does entail separate classes for boys and girls. The research shows that kids at this age learn better that way. So all the academics, which run from 7:30 to 3:15, are in separate classes for boys and girls. We find the kids flourish this way. All the post-academics, are all mixed. Musical instruction is also required for all the kids, and that happens for the hour after academics.

**NHI:** Why the focus on music?

**MS:** We find it's excellent for building a sense of team work, confidence, for learning to recognize patterns and so forth, which is helpful in all learning. Being part of the band is a big thing here!

**NHI:** And what happens at the end of the academic day?

**MS:** From 3:45 to 5 there are chess clubs, dance, sports, the kinds of things that enrich the lives of our students, who often are very poor in resources, so the aim is to get the kids to think college, to position them to get into good high schools, and colleges. And from 5 to 6 there's homework club. Everyone must attend. Our parents are committed to picking the kids up at 6:30.

**NHI:** What else do the parents commit to?

**MS:** They do sign a contract, which involves accepting the values of non-violence, and the commitment to the spirit of service, high expectations for a college education for their kids, and volunteerism. Our parents are terrific. This school runs on volunteerism.

**NHI:** And money as well, I suppose. The budget?



**MS:** Well, as John said, the budget is about \$960,000 this year for our 80 or so kids, about ten teachers, and everything else. There's a lot of sweat equity in this school. Saint Martin de Porres was a laborer, a kind of patron saint in Peru for hard work and for social justice. So everyone around here tries to model that.

**NHI:** Is there religious instruction?

**MS:** In the morning everyday there's a community gathering and we try to teach values, yes, but it's not theology, it's character-building. No formal religious instruction, although there will be a cross in every room. We have peer mediation too. That's important here, in a small school, where we train some of the kids and they are leaders in working through issues with their friends. But we're such a small school, and the kids spend eleven hours a day here, it is like a family. The teachers become very close with the kids. But we are no substitute for family; we partner with the families, and everyone is committed to the same goals.

**NHI:** You mentioned the importance of middle school, as a turning point age.

**MS:** Yes, John said it best just now: It's at this age, more or less, when kids decide if they're going to join a gang or aspire to go to college. It's wonderful and influential to teach this age. They're beginning to be mini-adults. You can talk choice and consequences and responsibility. This is critical.

**NHI:** And the school has a presence in the kids' lives in the summer and even after your kids graduate, is that right?

**MS:** All our incoming fifth-graders go to special summer school at Albertus Magnus College, where the college teachers do reading and math and prepare them. The other grades also have mandatory school in the summer. With our eighth graders – and we'll have our first crop of them next year – the school here will continue to be their resource. We're going to be hiring a support coordinator who will work with the kids in high school, tutoring, mentoring – and we hope to get them into Hopkins, Notre Dame, good high schools in the New Haven Public Schools as well – and to give them test preps for their SAT, help filling out applications, all those things that the kids' families might not have the resources to provide. We're dedicating space for that, a room, in the new school building.

**NHI:** Wasn't this mentoring of students at Sacred Heart/Saint Peters how SMPA got started?

**MS:** That's right. A bunch of lay Catholic leaders like John Crawford were providing scholarships for the Sacred Heart kids into high school and college. Founding a school that

does this, that's the focal point of continuing that kind of individual support, seemed a natural next step.

**NHI:** And what kind of results in terms of academic progress can you point to after two years?



**MS:** Many of our kids enter here reading two and sometimes three years behind. Three quarters live with a single parent, a third have incomes less than \$10,000. We're committed to each and every one of them, and the model expresses this in the class size, a one to twelve teacher to student ratio; with a teaching staff, half highly experience, half newer (several from Teach for America or similar groups) and full of enthusiasm. After a year, the kids catch up, almost all of them, doing a year and half's progress in one year, often more. Of our incoming 6th graders, 65 percent are at grade level in reading; 27 percent of all the students exceed grade level in reading by two grades; 20 percent of all students exceed grade level in math by two years. And, nationally, 90 percent of nativity-model middle school kids graduate from high school; 76 percent of them go on to two or four year colleges. So we know it works.

**NHI:** What are you particularly excited about this year?

**MS:** You mean apart from the pesto green paint? That's going to be a boys' math room; no one's going to fall asleep in there! Let me see: We're going to have, now in our third year, older kids, for the first time, for the fifth-graders really to look up to! Also, we have this wonderful old building, with huge classrooms, lovely airy windows looking out over the city. In the winter, we'll be able to see the water. And, of course, the kids themselves. We get very close with the kids here, we get to know them. There's an old teachers' adage about not smiling before Halloween.

**NHI:** Meaning?

**MS:** Meaning that you must emphasize classroom management and all that so you're a little stern in the beginning months of the school. That doesn't become an issue here. At SMPA, our teachers all smile well before Halloween.

Surowiecki says that there are only two slots left, for fifth-graders. But there are many slots left open for people to volunteer, to donate time — tutors are always needed — and funds, of course. The number to call is: 772-2424. And the website, which is in the process, of reflecting the new location, is [saintmartinacademy.org](http://saintmartinacademy.org)