

The Hummel Spotlight: Sophia Academy



Editor's note: The Hummel Report has launched a monthly feature called The Hummel Spotlight, focusing on people and organizations making a difference in the community.

PROVIDENCE - It is a finely tuned operation between periods in Melissa Moniz's classroom, as her 6th-graders head out the door and the 5th-graders settle in. Moniz, a math teacher, knows each girl in school by name. That's because she's taught all of the 60 students who are enrolled here.

The school is Sophia Academy on Branch Avenue. It is a private, non-denominational institution geared toward a very specific group: 5th- through 8th-grade girls from low-income homes, most with single parents.

And nearly all are from Providence, including Moniz, whose father came here from the Dominican Republic. She went to Mount Pleasant High School, then on to Brown University, where she was a pre-med major.

But after her freshman year, Moniz found she loved teaching more than medicine and came to Sophia nearly a decade ago, making her the veteran of the faculty. She sees herself in many of the girls. "I'm a young woman of color; I can relate to a lot of things that they experience in their day-to-day lives, whether it's food or different sayings that we say in our culture."

Gigi DiBello became Sophia's head of school five years ago, after working at the Highlander Charter School in Providence and before that, heading the women's center at Brown.

"Here, I think the kids feel understood, they feel respected," DiBello said. "We don't yell and they feel heard. So it's less of an adversarial situation and it's more of, 'We're in this together, because you're a girl and you're going to grow to be a woman, and I'm a woman and we have to kind of watch each other's backs.'"

Sophia Academy was founded 12 years ago by Mary Reilly, a Sister of Mercy from South Providence who spent six years in Central America and saw abject poverty. She had a dream of reaching girls, beginning in the 5th grade, and trying to break the cycle of poverty.

The expectations are high here: the girls have excelled on standardized tests and most go on to prominent high schools.

As a private school, Sophia relies on donations and grants to cover its \$900,000 annual budget. And while each family is expected to contribute something toward tuition, it's on a sliding scale and covers only a fraction of the total budget. That gave Gigi DiBello some pause when she came here in 2007.

DiBello: "If the mission is good and the founder is solid and there's the inspiration piece there, it makes sense. That stuff will take care of itself if you put together a solid team. But the money part was daunting. This is an independent school and most independent schools are built on a model where tuition is what feeds the school, so it's a pretty sound business model even during a difficult economic crisis."

Hummel: "And at the Bay Views, the Hendricks, the Exeters, the St. Andrew's, usually there's a pipeline of money."

DiBello: "Correct."

Hummel: "And that's the antithesis here."

DiBello: "And that's exactly right. Our model kind of turns that upside down so our tuition makes up 3 percent of our total budget."

And, DiBello says, Sophia faces a set of challenges different from many other independent schools. The academy is taking a big step as it plans to move from its current location - renting this building from St. Edward's Church on Branch Avenue - to a new location in South Providence, where most of its students live.

Sophia is buying the old ALP building on Elmwood Avenue and expecting to move in within the next two years. The Board of Directors has raised nearly half of the \$1.5 million goal.

"We'll be in that building within two years and we'll own that building. It sends a really strong message to our donors, to our families, to our teachers that we're here, we're here to stay, we're here to have a foothold in the community," DiBello said.

Moniz said she can't imagine teaching anywhere else. "I absolutely love being with the students and learning about them. I always say to the girls, 'This is a two-way street. So I'm going to give you something, you're going to give me something back in return. We're going to go back-and-forth.' I teach everyone. The 8th graders I have now I have had since 5th grade. I get to see their growth; I get to see how they develop as young women and also as students. And it's just a beautiful thing to be able to witness."

If you know of a person or organization that deserves the spotlight, send an email to spotlight@hummelreport.com.

