

# The Power of a Handshake

The first thing you notice on a visit to the San Miguel School is the handshake. The firm, look-you-in-the-eye-welcome-to-our-house handshake. Everybody gets in on the action: the kids, the teachers and the administrators.

San Miguel, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary, was founded in 1993 by Brother Lawrence Goyette - a Lasallian Christian Brother who began with a vision, \$50,000 in the bank and a lot of prayer.

Goyette, who still serves as executive director, opened in donated space at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in South Providence with two volunteer teachers and 15 boys. A career educator in Providence and New York, he originally planned for the school to be co-ed.

"As I met with educators and church people and community leaders and politicians, the common denominator was so many people said, 'You really might want to consider starting this school and just working with boys, because there are some really serious issues in Providence right now with boys



joining gangs and we're losing a lot of kids,'" he said.

So began San Miguel, a private, independent faith-based (but non-sectarian) school for five dozen boys from low-income families. It has grown to an annual budget now of \$1.2 million and three years ago moved to the former St. Ann's school on Branch Avenue. The boys - 16 in each class, grades 5 through 8 - pay tuition on a sliding scale. But tuition only accounts for about 5 percent of the budget. The rest comes from donations and grants.

By design, the kids are a mix of good and struggling students - boys who are model kids and others who have behavioral problems.

Karen Clements became a teacher at San Miguel six years ago. A graduate of LaSalle Academy, she had planned to stay in Philadelphia after graduating from Temple University. But that all changed when a spot opened up for a 5th-grade teacher and she came for a visit. Why?

"It was the fact that when you walk in the door, every single student comes up, looks you in the eye and shakes your hand," Clements said. "And you join together as a whole school every morning of every day. And the community feeling of it - the fact that we're like family here."

The morning meeting is an integral part of the school day and because of the school's size, it is an

intimate gathering. Every day at 8:20 am, the student body and faculty gather in the school's cafeteria to talk about things like the word of the week, to share announcements or to reflect on what's going on in their lives.

"And you'll end up sometimes with a 12-year-old who gets up and bares his soul," said Goyette. "He talks about his experience at San Miguel right at that moment, warts and all, and all the kids sit there and listen, and then some of them will even have words of advice at the end. What 12-year old kids will do that?"

And what about that handshake? It has, in many ways, become San Miguel's signature.

**Goyette:** One of the things that I've noticed over two or three years is when kids come in in the morning, I'll shake each kid's hand, every teacher in the lobby will extend a hand and say something that's simple like, "How are you today?" The boys will shake your hand, look you in the eye and say, "I'm doing well. How are you?" That's a huge thing with a 12-year-old boy.

**Hummel:** And can I tell you I'm impressed that it's not the wet noodle handshake. You've got to have a nice firm one and look the other person right in the eye.

**Goyette:** And the eye contact is important.

For the first time, the 8th-grade graduation was held last month in the school's gymnasium. It is the last class that went to the old school in South Providence as 5th-graders, ending one chapter of the school's two-decade history. Most will go to private high schools like LaSalle and St. Ray's next year, sad to leave the nurturing environment they've enjoyed, but excited about new opportunities. During the ceremony, Goyette spoke personally, and at length, about each of the 16 new graduates.

Mike Garcia, one of the graduates, reflected on changes he sees in himself that took place over the past four years. "Being a lot more respectful, being a lot more helpful, being a well-rounded person. That's mostly what they teach us here - to be respectful, to be responsible and to do the right thing when adults *aren't* looking and when they are."

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