



The Times

A school blossoms in Newark

Thursday, January 27, 2011

Mea Kaemmerlen

SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Last Sunday, the Falcons and Lady Falcons swooped in from Newark and caught the Princeton crowd by surprise.

As fans cheered and the band surged, these middle-schoolers showed their stuff on the university's Jadwin Gym basketball court.

It was halftime at the Princeton Tigers' 16th game this season against The College of New Jersey. As the 6- and 7-foot players headed for the locker room, the 4- and 5-foot fifth-to-eighth graders sprang forward in blue-team and white-team uniforms to compete in a 10-minute skirmish.

They were from St. Philip's Academy, a K-8 school in downtown Newark.

"We're delighted to come down to Princeton," school head Miguel Brito told me. "We want the students to get used to being on a university campus."

That's no idle talk.

Most of his students go on to good secondary schools and more than 95 percent subsequently enter four-year colleges. No small feat for a school in a city where half the kids drop out and only 20 percent of graduates attend four-year colleges.

"We're not a school for exceptional students," Brito pointed out.

"These are typical kids who are willing to work hard and need a challenging environment. We find the kids through churches and youth programs. Public school principals often let us know which kids will benefit from St. Philip's."

St. Philip's began in response to a heartbreaking incident years ago.

A philanthropist offered full scholarships to two Newark students to attend a top New England boarding school. Sadly, no academically qualified students were found.

Appalled, the pastor and congregation of Newark's Trinity & St. Philip's Cathedral vowed not to miss another opportunity and, in 1988, opened St. Philip's Academy for a handful of first-graders.

Since then, St. Philip's has blossomed into a flourishing school, enrollment 340, housed in a renovated factory building.

"We're proud of our high-tech and low-tech resources for students," said Brito. "Verizon, Google and Cisco have been instrumental in building our technology."

Asked if Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg's \$100 million gift to Newark will reach them, Brito said, "I doubt it. But you know what they say, Don't just give a man a fish. Teach him to fish."

He said that the school's EcoSPACES -- a program integrated into the curriculum that includes rooftop and indoor gardens, a test kitchen, community supported agriculture and kitchen classrooms -- gives students tools to lead healthy and environmentally productive lives.



MEA KAEMMERLEN
Serendipity

"We just had a workshop for parents on eating healthy in a city where bodegas are the main food stores," he said. "We want our parents on board."

He mentioned a class studying Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

"They're knitting coral formations in class."

Did I hear right? Knitting?

"Yes," he said. "Knitting is allowed in most classes."

The class will "visit" a nearby Australian school via teleconferencing. Knitting and teleconferencing in one classroom -- that's a first.

On the basketball court, the students played on, rushing up and down the court. Coach Chris Barnes started with single substitutions.

"But when I saw how many were on the bench, I just swapped them out so all could play," he said.

Proud parents watched. A father, pastor of a Baptist church, had told his congregation that he didn't have time to talk after the service. "I have to support my son today," he said.

A mother told me how her son came to St. Philip's, "My husband knew about the school for years and decided our kid was going to SPA even before he was conceived!"

There's an endorsement.

The blue team won, but no one seemed to know or care by how much. It was just a great event for a hardworking group of students, parents and school staff.

By late afternoon, they were on their way back to Newark.

Mea Kaemmerlen lives in Plainsboro. Contact her at meakaem@aol.com.

©2011 Times of Trenton

© 2011 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.