



Rey of Hope

The entire graduating class at a unique school transcends poverty and heads to college.

By Evan Serpick

It's just before noon at Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Upper Fells Point. Students in crisp white shirts and purple-and-grey-striped ties file into the spotless lunch room, which doubles as a gym and an auditorium. ¶ In a nearby conference room, several seniors, just months away from graduating, gather to discuss their college plans. But one of the class's standout students, James Townes, is missing. He's attending a funeral for a

friend from his block in the nearby Perkins Homes housing project who was recently robbed and killed. It's not the first time he's missed school for a funeral.

"Living in the neighborhood that I live in and knowing the people that I grew up with, it's not as hard for me as it would be for some people," says Townes. "I've seen it and experienced things like this most of my life."

A lot of students at Cristo Rey have similar backgrounds to Townes's. The private Catholic school, one of 24 in the national Cristo Rey Network, was created four years ago, with the mission to offer low-income kids—many from the city's most troubled neighborhoods—a rigorous college preparatory education with a work-study component.

To be accepted into Cristo Rey, eighth graders must demonstrate, through an application and interview process, a commitment to their education, and prove that they come from a low-income family. The current freshman class has a median household income of about \$29,000.

Theoretically, tuition at the school is \$2,500—about one-fifth of the typical tuition at most private schools. But virtually every student receives financial aid: About 75 percent of families pay \$750 per year or less. The school is funded primarily by its innovative work program, along with donor funds.

As part of the work program, local companies like M&T Bank and The Johns Hopkins University hire a rotating team of students to fill an entry-level job and pay the school \$25,000 per position. Typically, the teens work five days per month (once a week, plus one Friday per month), and a team of four fills a single position.

Cristo Rey isn't for everyone. In the fall of 2007, 121 students entered the first freshman class. Over the next four years, many transferred after struggling with the academic program. By senior year, the class had shrunk

From left: Mariah Gangapersad, Chris Ellis, Rev. John Swope, James Townes, and Keyona McNeil.

down to the 78 students who will make up the school's first graduating class this month.

All 78 have been accepted to college and are planning to attend.

"We're really explicit about our mission," says Lucy Neale Duke, the school's director of college counseling. "It is to have every student graduate from Cristo Rey Jesuit High School and a four-year college."

For students, the difficulty of the workload—which includes Advanced Placement and college preparatory classes, along with work-study jobs—is often compounded by the fact that peers in their neighborhoods are often not working nearly as hard.

"I have about four hours of homework a night—my friends have maybe 30 minutes," says Townes, who will attend Stevenson University in the fall and plans to become a lawyer. "When I first started at Cristo Rey, I was really jealous of my friends. But as time went on, I noticed that they were begging for more homework. They wanted to be where I was."

THE MOVEMENT TO CREATE BALTIMORE'S CRISTO Rey Jesuit High School began almost a decade ago with a group of concerned citizens, mostly parents, who were unhappy with the high school options for low-income children.

"They felt they were losing generation after generation to really locked-in poverty," says Rev. John Swope, the school's president, who worked in the central office of the Maryland Jesuits when the group approached, asking them to sponsor a school in Baltimore. "The grinding, cyclical force of that in Baltimore City takes your breath away."

Many of the people in that group had been involved in building St. Ignatius Loyola Academy, an alternative middle school that has had success with students from low-income families. The Jesuits conducted a feasibility study, which included finding a potential location for the school and identifying corporate employers for the work-study program, and decided to build its fourteenth school here. (They've opened ten more since then.)

"Our approach has gone really well in Baltimore," says Swope, who served briefly as a teacher and ran an education nonprofit in Santiago, Chile, before coming to Baltimore. "There was anger over the state of education,

and the parents were just saying 'We are not going to tolerate this anymore.'"

Each year since it opened, Cristo Rey has accepted about 100 new students. But its reputation has spread, thanks to word-of-mouth and a concerted marketing effort, and there has been a 72 percent increase in completed applications in the last year.

Rev. Swope says the Jesuits have no plans to open a new school or expand the current one, but he hopes Cristo Rey becomes one of the top options for poor families in Baltimore.

"We can't change the whole thing by ourselves—no private initiative is going to fix it all," he says. "But we can start this small school and say that we helped our students get into college, better preparing them for the future."

CRISTO REY'S JOB PROGRAM HAS EVOLVED INTO a key educational component, but at first, it was just a way to keep the lights on.

"When the Cristo Rey Network came up with the idea of the work program, it didn't have anything to do with the educational value—it had to do with paying the bills," says Swope. "But on the second day, they realized that something was going on, and it became an important part of the curriculum."

Teachers and administrators say being in professional workplaces like banks, accounting firms, law offices, and universities not

"The parents were just saying, 'We are not going to tolerate this anymore.'"

only offers young people the chance to learn professional skills, but by observing smart, successful people, they have incentive to achieve. In fact, several students interviewed said the work program was the primary factor that drew them to Cristo Rey.

"I liked the opportunity to work and not just be in a school environment," says senior Mariah Gangapersad, who lives in Northwest Baltimore and will go to the prestigious Barnard College next year.

For students, many of whom come from

underperforming middle schools, the transition to a professional workplace can be hard. The school eases the transition with a "boot camp" the summer before freshman year, where students learn how to shake hands and greet colleagues, among other "soft skills." "It's just to help a kid get over the hump on that first day," Swope says.

On work days, the students are picked up at school at 8 a.m. and taken to their work places, then brought back in the afternoon.

"Our first year, they were all 14 years old," Swope recalls. "I watched the bus drive away, wondering what was going to happen. Is it going to be so traumatic that the kids aren't going to come back for a second day?"

In fact, most students thrived in their workplaces, and many stayed with the same employer throughout their four years.

James Townes has worked at the DLA Piper law firm for four years, doing everything from filing and answering the phones to taking courtroom notes for lawyers and participating in mock trials.

"He was making friends with our partners," says Ronney Manger, the head librarian at DLA Piper. "They took him to lunch to talk about law school and what it's like to be a lawyer—they really took him under their wing."

For Townes, the experience was invaluable, helping him understand various kinds of law—something few high-school students get to do. "I talked to each lawyer about what they do," he says. "It's been a great experience."

In addition to the academic curriculum and work schedule, students also have theology and college counseling classes. Less than a quarter of students are Catholic, but everyone takes ecumenical religion classes, like Body Mind and Spirit for freshman, Ethics for juniors, and World Religions for seniors. Even nonreligious students say they value the classes for the discussions they spark.

"This is a Catholic school, but Catholicism isn't the main thing," says senior Jaysalee Ferrer, an Upper Fells Point resident who will go to Mount St. Mary's College next year. There is an optional weekly mass and compulsory monthly service. "I don't think it makes anybody feel isolated."

More central to the school's mission is its laser-like focus on getting students into col-

lege. Beginning freshman year, college counselors meet with kids and parents to outline the components and timeline for the college application process. This year, freshmen also visited Loyola University, sitting in on classes, to start them thinking about college.

Sophomores meet monthly with college counselors to go over research about schools and make a visit to an out-of-town college. Juniors and seniors have weekly classes to go over applications, scholarships, and financial aid, and meet with representatives from various schools, as well as a once-weekly class to prepare for the SAT and ACT tests. Senior year, there are also workshops on financial aid and making the transition to college.

"They make sure you don't miss a deadline," says senior Keyona McNeil, who grew up in Northwest Baltimore and will go to Goucher College on a full scholarship. "If you have a question, they're right there."

To further help students make the transition to college, Cristo Rey is hiring a full-time graduate support coordinator, charged with

helping recent graduates confront the various challenges of the college environment.

"This person will help them negotiate this new situation and become independent," says Duke, the college counseling director. "We want to do our best to make sure they succeed even after they leave here." ■

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