

September 7, 2004
CITYWIDE



Students who will attend Cristo Rey High School in East Harlem mingled last week after a Mass celebrating its opening.

Start-Up Invests Faith in 99 Students

By **DAVID GONZALEZ**

Years from now, in a city that has yet to be made, a lawyer, a pediatrician, a teacher or perhaps even a millionaire turned philanthropist will ponder life's crazy course and remember how their futures began on this very day. They will look back, to a half-renovated 19th-century red brick schoolhouse in East Harlem where generations of immigrants and poor people once streamed through cramped rooms in search of just a touch of comfort and security. Unlike many commuters whose only view of this neighborhood is a kinetic blur from the windows of a Metro-North train rumbling down Park Avenue, they will discover that East 106th Street is hardly a dead end. It is the crossroads of the world.

Today, 99 teenagers enter the ninth grade at Cristo Rey High School, a new alternative Roman Catholic college preparatory school supported by people who have not just wealth and gratitude, but faith in those who have only talent. One of 11 in a network of Cristo Rey schools around the country, it represents a dream of many, from the worshipers at St. Cecilia's church who longed for the day when a school would once again bring young life to the parish, to the three religious orders that relied on their collective 900 years of educational mission in creating it.

Eder Guzman, a smiling, confident 14-year-old, knows he has the kind of opportunity that his parents hoped for when they left all they knew in Mexico for an unknown chance in East Harlem. He wants to be a psychologist, he says, since he likes "wisdom and talking to people." The eldest of four boys, he lets out a nervous laugh at what awaits him.

"I have to set an example," he said.

William Ford, the school's principal, knows that all too well. Almost a quarter century ago his family learned the tragic, bloody price that faith in action can exact. His aunt was Ita Ford, a Maryknoll nun who was murdered with three colleagues by soldiers in El Salvador in December 1980. His experiences and her example, he said, led him gently but inexorably to a community of not just hardship, but hope.

"Ita entered into an understanding of the lives of people who did not have protection, advantage or respect," Mr. Ford said. "She entered this world of suffering and fear, but also one where people had strong faith. I felt called to try to do something here. I have not only something to offer, but I might have the privilege to learn."



William Ford, the principal, says he feels "called to try to do something here."

The school, modeled after one that opened in Chicago in 1996, offers a simple deal to its students, many of them immigrants and the first in their families to go to high school. You work hard, and we will believe in you. You will not only graduate, but you will be accepted into several colleges. While diocesan schools face mounting costs and declining enrollments, the Cristo Rey - the name means Christ the King - model has been able to thrive and keep tuition costs low. With the help of local businesses, the school operates as a temporary employment agency that places students in clerical jobs. Teams of four students apiece share one job; each team member earns \$6,250,

which covers almost 75 percent of tuition. Benefactors have also provided money to help parents who cannot come up with the remaining \$2,000 in tuition.

The earliest Cristo Rey schools have been so successful that last year the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation donated \$18.9 million to develop a dozen more. The money provides the start-up capital for a feasibility study and the first five years, after which the schools are expected to be self-supporting.

"It works, it's that simple," said B. J. Cassin, a venture capitalist whose foundation created the network of schools. "I'm a businessman, and I once said it could be franchised. The educators went, 'Oh, my God!' So instead I say they can be replicated."

But getting the first one opened in New York City was a challenge. Administrators at some Catholic high schools in the Bronx worried that the new school would poach students. A location was not found until late last year, when Cardinal Edward M. Egan, the New York archbishop, offered Mr. Ford use of the building at St. Cecilia's, where renovations began only six weeks ago. Even filling the first entering class took longer than expected, although applications began to roll in through word of mouth. "It was humbling," Mr. Ford said. "But we were looking for people who did not know or believe we were looking for them."

Some parents must have thought there was a catch to the offer of an affordable education that would rival the best schools on the other Park Avenue, a mile to the south. Lucille Figueroa, an unemployed single mother of three who refused to send her daughter, Allyson, to the local public high school, was near despair.

"I went on the Internet and typed in 'low cost Catholic school' and Cristo Rey came up," she said. "Forget about it. I jumped on it fast."

Mr. Ford has little doubt that the school's academic standards and its work-study program attract students and parents.

"The subtext is about becoming even more deeply aware of each person's dignity," he said. "Being forced to find that in other people. We know they are expected to graduate and go to college. But our final criterion is the hardest to measure: how and for whose sake do they put that education to use?"

Some possible answers to that were found last Wednesday, as parents and students joined priests, teachers and benefactors for an inaugural Mass at St. Cecilia's. Afterward, they mingled in the church basement, a spartan place that once was probably the worship space for the neighborhood's newest arrivals.

Marcela Sanchez, a mother of four from Mott Haven, in the Bronx, by way of Mexico, beamed by the side of her oldest child, Maria del Carmen. Her daughter will have the kind of teenage life that was impossible for Mrs. Sanchez and her husband, Biliulfo, who came to New York when he was 16 and, after 22 years, now works as a cook's helper. "Like my husband says, I do not want her to work in a restaurant for minimum wage, suffering in the heat," Mrs. Sanchez said. "I want her to progress and be something."

Maria del Carmen, a slight young thing with big hoop earrings that swayed with each giggle and laugh, said she wanted to be a lawyer.

"I like to defend people," she said. "I want to work for immigrants. I see how people do bad things to them."

She has a head start on her goal: her work-study job is at one of those fancy law firms with five names. She starts the same day school begins. Today.

She leans in close and smiles, half nervously, half conspiratorially.

"I'm there the first day," she said. "I have to make the impression for Cristo Rey there."

Beyond the smile, beyond her age, beyond the block, the impression is already there.