

Christian Principal Helps Transform Inner-City School in Michigan

Ruth Jones believes God sent her to the struggling school in Grand Rapids to give the students 'a chance at life'

The moment Ruth Jones stepped into the building, she knew it was going to be bad.

The Grand Rapids, Mich., public elementary school known as Henry Paideia Academy “looked like the ruins of something,” she said. The building was dark and cold, and “there were no pictures ... no signs anywhere that children were inhabiting this place.”

But as she stood in the hall, she said God began to reveal His plan for the school that was on the verge of closing. “He let the hallway appear pitch black all around me,”

Jones said. “But where I stood there was light. If I moved, the light moved. He said, ‘You are the light in this place now.’”

That was 10 years ago when Henry Academy was about to become the only school in Grand Rapids’ history to be closed because of failure. A study had shown that in 10 years only a quarter of its students had graduated from high school, and none had gone on to college.

Today students from Henry Paideia (which means “the upbringing

of a child" in Greek) are not only graduating from high school, they're joining the National Honor Society.

The school's dramatic turnaround has been the subject of media reports, and the academy has received numerous awards and accolades, as well as visits from former Michigan Gov. John Engler and then-Texas Gov. George W. Bush.

What's more the 300-student school that once faced closure has a waiting list.

At the center of the transformation stands Jones, a celebrated inner-city schoolteacher who didn't have a master's degree or experience in administration and never wanted to be a principal. But when her file somehow ended up on the superintendent's desk as a candidate to lead the struggling school, she sensed God leading her to pursue the position.

A 20-member panel interviewed her, asking for an introduction and her philosophy on education. "I told them how the Lord changed my life," Jones said. "I told them, 'God is bringing me to this school because He wants to heal these children and give them a chance at life.'"

Ninety minutes after her interview, she was named head of the school. That's when her work began. The school had long been dysfunctional. "One teacher stacked books on her desk like a fort so the children wouldn't hit her," Jones said.

Many of the students lived in poverty, and their neighborhoods were infested with drugs and crime. Jones said she began to pray that God's anointing would destroy every yoke keeping the children from learning, a habit she maintains.

"When I touch these children, I know I am in covenant with [God], and these bondages will drop off," Jones said.

Jones addressed their practical needs too. Some children came to school dirty, so she installed four washing machines and dryers to clean their clothes.

"It's not always easy [teaching at the school]," said fourth-grade teacher Rozanna Lee. "Some of these students have a lot of emotional baggage. I tell them that it is amazing what they have to deal with and still make it to school."

A staff of 100 volunteers does everything from comb hair to tutor in reading and math. The school teaches parenting skills, and church groups and businesses help provide food and clothing.

"I was inspired to get involved by President Bush's speech to do something for the community," said volunteer Patsy Lucas. "By working one on one with the same child every week, I feel that I brought some stability to the life of that child."

Jones fights to give her students the same quality of life children from wealthier neighborhoods have. "We act like just because a child is poor, they are going to be able to do without all the things our kids have and be the same as our kids and come out all right. We sow nothing, we reap nothing," Jones said.

Even 10 years later, Jones is still amazed at how the school changed. "There's nothing particularly great about me. [God] just said, 'You'll do,'" Jones said.

"I know I can do anything if I align myself with God."

Jean Van Houten in Grand Rapids, Mich.