



Turnaround tales at two St. Anthony's

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When parents at an enrollment-challenged Catholic school in the San Pedro Region learned they would have to search for another school to enroll their children for the 2009-2010 school year - and teachers were told they would probably need to find a new job - they took action.

As a result, St. Anthony School in El Segundo not only kept its doors opened, but increased its enrollment through new administration, innovative marketing plans, aggressive advertising and publicity, and community and foundation support. The K-8 school population increased 58 percent, from 106 in the 2008-2009 school year to 167 students for 2009-2010.

The support of the pastor, Father Robert Victoria and parishioners has been a huge factor in the turnaround. So too is prayer, with many prayers no doubt seeking the intercession of St. Anthony de Padua, the patron of lost things and one of the great preachers and teachers of his time.

St. Anthony School, El Segundo

When Father Victoria was informed by archdiocesan authorities that St. Anthony School was in danger of closing, he brought up the issue within a homily. That generated a positive response from parishioners, many of them parents or teachers at the school.



Board members, seeking to rejuvenate its membership, started recruiting parents who had been actively participating in the school activities. One was Felipe Gutierrez, a technology-savvy director of academic computing services at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles.

The resident of Del Aire, a tiny unincorporated middle-class neighborhood minutes from El Segundo, could think of no other school where he wanted to enroll his two children. "I wanted the school to remain open. It is Christian-based and its faculty is dedicated and enthusiastic," Gutierrez told *The Tidings*. At the same time, "We needed to re-image the school, create a brand."



He joined the board and started supporting the school, notably by helping with computers in the classroom. Gutierrez is also in charge of a technology campaign to renew the almost obsolete computer lab with brand new donated equipment. To remind everyone about the effort, authorities keep a rendering of the future lab in the main office and one in the meeting room.

Aside from the lab, junior high classrooms have been equipped with five laptops each, donated by the U.S. Department of Housing. Classrooms also feature updated digital projectors.

Homegrown Help

The search for a new principal to help revitalize the 50-year-old school's image produced a candidate from within the St. Anthony community. One day at the mall, Elaine Shawcross, St. Anthony's fifth grade teacher (and now assistant principal), saw fellow parishioner Georgiana Curcio, a teacher with many years of experience in Hawthorne's public school system; the two had been friends since their children (now in high school) were kindergartners at St. Anthony School.

"I told her we needed to talk," said Shawcross. "The teachers were heart-broken. We asked ourselves, 'What can faculty do?' We were praying about it."

The answer to their prayers was Curcio, who was accepted as principal by the 12-member board, even though Curcio admitted she had concerns about her own lack of administrative experience. The community, though, knew she could learn those skills through training and faculty support; more important was her

knowledge of St. Anthony's community (her husband Fred is a school alumnus) and her capacity to listen to suggestions.

From day one Curcio implemented an open-door policy. She is available at any time to parents, teachers or students. She also understands that faith and family are tied together.

"Georgina is a positive factor for the school," Father Victoria said. "She can connect with parents."

Admittedly, St. Anthony faces challenging competition from both public and other private schools in the area, which have a good curriculum. But Curcio is backed by a "vibrant school board," noted Father Victoria, and - as the only Catholic school in El Segundo - is able to draw Catholic families from Hawthorne, Del Aire and Torrance.

Non-parishioners have also supported St. Anthony's fundraisers including Casino Night, Bob Dylan Festival and Mardi Gras Night. A 2010 alumni reunion to celebrate the school's 50th anniversary is also on the schedule.

Recently-implemented ideas include elimination of the \$4,900 non-parishioner tuition, the institution of bonuses to families who would refer a new student, and offering a first-month discount to the new family.



Father Victoria, also a board member, is happy with the result. Support from the archdiocese has included scholarships from the Catholic Education Foundation, mostly for students from working class Latino families.

On Nov. 15, Father Robert - as parishioners call him - will request parishioners to continue supporting the school by sponsoring one-month or one-year student scholarships. The enrollment goal for the 2010-2011 school year is 200 students.

"The school has a promising future with a great board and enthusiastic parishioners," said the pastor.