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Jesuit Message Drives Detroit's Last Catholic School

By Amy Sullivan / Detroit

Lunch period at an inner-city all-boys school is an event associated with the sounds of chaos, not classical music. And yet there are definitely strains of Beethoven coming from the piano in the cafeteria at the University of Detroit Jesuit High School and Academy. Behind the pianist, another student waits patiently for his turn. Upstairs in the art room, a senior is using the lunch hour to apply more brushstrokes to a portrait. A few kids are playing pickup ball in the gym, but more are crowded in the library.

In a city where 47% of adults are functionally illiterate and only 25% of high school freshmen make it to graduation, U of D is the chute through which bright young men can get to college. The school boasts a near perfect graduation rate and sends 99% of its graduates on to higher education. (In 2009 the one student who didn't go to college turned down a scholarship from the University of Michigan to sign a seven-figure contract with the Detroit Tigers.) [\(See pictures of Detroit's beautiful, horrible decline.\)](#)

Catholic high schools have long provided a way out for high-achieving urban students. But in Detroit, most Catholic schools either closed down or left the city decades ago, after the race riots in 1967, when white Catholics fled to the suburbs and the city's population dropped by half. Only the Jesuits stayed, maintaining U of D's imposing stone structure on the corner of 7 Mile and Cherrylawn. The Catholic order is known for its education systems and its missionary work. In Detroit, they have become one and the same. [\(See more on TIME's Detroit blog.\)](#)

Detroit was once heavily Catholic, dotted with parochial schools in well over 100 parishes that served the Irish and East European immigrants who built the city. Of those, the oldest was the University of Detroit, founded as a Jesuit high school and college in 1877. Elmore Leonard wrote theology papers

there before the detective novels that made him famous. The school produced Congressmen, state supreme court justices and a president of CBS.

Then came 1967 and the race riots that lasted five days, took 43 lives and changed the composition of Detroit almost overnight. The trickle of white ethnic Catholics to the suburbs that had started after World War II became a flood. Within seven years, the city's African-American residents had become a majority. But only 50,000 or so were Catholic, which meant the archdiocese could no longer support the same network of parishes and schools. ([See the top 10 religion stories of 2008.](#))

The tectonic shifts threw U of D into crisis. In less than a decade, the school's rolls plummeted from a high of about 1,100 students to no more than 500. In 1976 the Jesuits found themselves beset by parents, alumni and faculty arguing that the school should follow the lead of Detroit's other marquee Catholic institution, Catholic Central, and relocate to the suburbs. An intense internal debate was followed by consultation with Rome and finally a decision: not only would the school remain in Detroit, but it would also start investing its resources in the city and increase the racial diversity of its student body.

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Today approximately one-quarter of the school's 780 students are city residents, with the rest spread across the inner and outer suburbs. The school allocated \$1.4 million in financial aid this year to students who could not afford the \$9,990 tuition. "We will not turn away any student who is qualified to come here," says U of D principal Gary Marando.

Jesuits tend to roll their eyes at portrayals of their order's missionary zeal. (Jeremy Irons' action Jesuit in *The Mission*, says Father Patrick Peppard, one of the school's theology teachers, was "a bit romanticized.") Still, by any measure, U of D's service to the city of Detroit since the Jesuits decided to remain has been remarkable. During a period in the late 1970s and early '80s, the school's president, Father Malcolm Carron, was even made a Detroit police commissioner. ([See pictures of the remains of Detroit.](#))

U of D's continued presence in Detroit offers inner-city boys a way out. But it also gives affluent suburban students a way into a city that has long been neglected by its neighbors. For them, an education at U of D doesn't involve just driving across city lines to attend classes. Seniors are required to spend every Wednesday morning on a service project in the city. And students in all grades (7 through 12) volunteer their time for no credit. Last year they spent more than 3,500 hours

in activities from tutoring public-school kids to delivering food to disabled residents. "We made a commitment to stay in the city," says Holly Bennetts, the school's full-time service director. "We have a responsibility to make it better." ([See pictures of a diverse group of American teens.](#))

Students are told hundreds of times during their education at U of D that they are training to become community leaders, what the Jesuits call "men for others." The phrase comes up in nearly every conversation with current and former students. "It's kinda corny," says Keith Ellison, class of 1981 and a Democratic Congressman from Minnesota, "but that motto really made me think about service. And it set a course for what I'm doing with my life now."

The Jesuit ideal can also be found in more recent graduates like Will Ahee and Tom Howe. Both grew up in tony communities — Grosse Pointe and Birmingham — that may be geographically close to Detroit but are worlds away culturally. Through U of D, they volunteered with Earthworks, an urban garden project that is reclaiming for sustainable agriculture some of the thousands of acres of abandoned lots in Detroit. When they graduated a few years ago, Ahee and Howe could have had their pick of universities. They chose to stay in Detroit and attend Wayne State University, where they study comprehensive food systems. How do these college kids spend their weekends? Working in a community garden they started near Elmwood Park, nine miles from U of D.

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**The University of Detroit Jesuit
High School and Academy is
the last Catholic college-prep
school left in the city.**

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