

URBAN EXPERIENCE

The third C.O.R. event of the year was held at the International Conference Center (ICC) in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago on Saturday, February 24, 2001. Uptown is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the country, with over 60

languages spoken in the local high school, no dominant ethnic group, people from all socio-economic strata and a third of the residents born in countries other than the United States. This neighborhood set the stage for "Many Voices, One Song" as C.O.R. focused on building the City of God, which Uptown models in its commitment to diversity and to providing the social services and community organizations that its citizens need.

The day began with Patty Nolan-Fitzgerald, Principal of Queen of Peace High School and founder of C.O.R., inviting students to make known their intentions as participants in the day. Students named the reasons they had gotten out of bed early on that cold, rainy Saturday to come to the C.O.R. Urban Experience. And in naming such intentions as "I hope to make my neighborhood more welcoming" or "I want to help eradicate racism" students became part of the morning prayer. Nolan-Fitzgerald then reminded students that as members of the Catholic school community, we must work to bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth; she then asked students to discuss with a neighbor what they imagined the city of God to look and sound like and to imagine how people would feel in the City of God. Students knew that in the City of God all will feel loved, welcomed and known. Suzanne Wille, Coordinator of C.O.R., then asked students to think about the characteristics of their own "cities" or neighborhoods, ending by asking students if they thought their neighborhoods could be more diverse and more welcoming and if students wanted to make their neighborhoods a better place. The facilitators for the day, Susan Rans and Megan Carney, then gave students the history of Uptown, explaining the many shifts the place has undergone and the community organizations and cultural observations that have sustained the success of Uptown as a very mixed, densely populated neighborhood.



After the introduction to the day, the participants were divided into three groups, with each group heading for a different experience. Each group went on a neighborhood walk, during which students observed the overwhelming diversity of Uptown and learned about the encroaching gentrification of Uptown and the community organizing currently being done to maintain diversity and to retain affordable housing. Each walk took students to a different location, at which they saw a presentation either by Mehrdad Azemun, a community organizer with the Organization of the North East (O.N.E.),



Denice Erwin and Laverne Nickson, two tenant organizers or Helen Shiller, the Alderwoman for Uptown.

After taking a neighborhood walk and seeing one of the above presentations, participants returned to the ICC to eat lunch and socialize with one another. After lunch Scrap Mettle SOUL, a community performance group, performed a number of stories that have been gathered from the Uptown community.



Students saw such scenes as an older man reminiscing about eloping with his wife, and a conflict in the community between old residents and new immigrants and the story of a child defending his mother from his abusive father.



The participants enjoyed this artistic representation of the Uptown neighborhood, but were surprised to find that they were expected to create their own scenes based on what they had learned that day in Uptown. Participants then got into groups that included people who had seen each of the

three speakers. In these groups, students first described their experiences and then they named what they felt most inspired by and then most challenged by. From those lists, the group chose one event to represent dramatically. From there, the creativity really exploded! The groups presented their skits, which were alternately funny and poignant. Finally, we ended the day with a shared prayer, during which each group read aloud their answer to the prompt "We dream that our neighborhoods . . . To each dream the group responded "Together we can raise our voices to build the city of God"



There were 115 students and 19 faculty from 15 different schools in the Archdiocese registered for this Urban Experience.