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7200 W. Division St.
River Forest, IL 60305
708-524-5984 (5)
Fax 708-714-9002

www.dvusa.org

Marie Cassidy, Director
mcassidy@dom.edu

Donielle Dodde Xu,
Marketing and
Recruitment Coordinator
ddodde@dom.edu

A Summer Night in Chicago

by Mary Hornschemeier, St. Leonard's Adult Education, Chicago, IL

Yesterday I stood outside in one of the worst neighborhoods in Chicago, surrounded by large, muscular men whose tattoos told me things about their past that they would not. It was 10:00 pm, I was unarmed, and as I watched a drug dealer drive past, I wondered what my mother would think of this.

One of the ex-cons offered me his french fries, and we kept chatting.

The gentlemen who were standing around outside with me had volunteered to watch my back while I waited for my ride. During the wait, we discussed their plans - one of them wants to start his own restaurant, another wants to travel the world - and they told me how they're going to go about doing it.

Yesterday was the first day of class at the school where I'm working, St. Leonard's Adult High School, a completion program for ex-offenders who, for countless reasons, did not finish high school the first time around. In many ways, they are an educator's dream. These men and women know more than anyone the value of an education, and they want desperately to earn a high school diploma, to stay out of jail, to remain clean and sober, to support themselves. Many of them are unable to see their own potential, though, and we are all looking at tonight's Math class with some nervousness. Fractions loom large in their list of longtime enemies.

My job is to coordinate their tutoring schedules, compile their transcripts and bug them about due dates. At the end of the semester, my job will also be to produce a diploma for those who survive the rigorous 14-week senior-year equivalency program. Carlos, one of my favorite students, told me that was why they were watching my back.

"If you get killed, I don't get a diploma, and I don't want to do all this work for nothing," he said. We all laughed, but Carlos needs that diploma almost as desperately as I need a few bulky bodyguards in the hood. He just started driving a forklift on the midnight-8am shift so he could go to school in the evening. He's a smart man who learns quickly, but he has a felony on his record and no high school diploma, so he's stuck.

The Sinsinawa Dominicans that I live with love to say that at the heart of ministry is relationship. As I enjoyed the summer evening with those gentlemen, I realized that a little more. I have been falling in love with these people - the woman who screamed and hugged me when I told her she had gotten into the class, the gentleman who arrived at school 40 minutes early, nervously asking me if I knew what the homework would be - and I want nothing more than to see them realize their potential.

At 10:15pm, one of the residents walked out and said, "Mary, why you still here?" I told him, "I just love my job too much to leave."

I was only half joking.



Mary Hornschemeier with one of her students



Mary teaches a computer class in the computer lab