

Gala: A Night to Remember

The Catholic Review

This past Saturday, approximately 1,100 people came together at the Baltimore Convention Center to raise money for tuition assistance for the children of our Catholic schools. If those who attended the third annual Archdiocese of Baltimore Gala were as impressed by the program as I was, they left the event with far more than they could have imagined.

As they entered the Convention Center guests were greeted with the joyful singing of the combined choir of students from Baltimore's community schools -Archbishop Borders, Cardinal Shehan, Holy Angels, St. Ambrose, Ss. James and John. I can think of no better way to begin our celebration of Catholic schools and I am so grateful to the students, their parents - many of whom came to see them perform - and their outstanding director, Ms. Kenyatta Hardison, of Cardinal Shehan School.

During the pre-dinner reception, students from several of our schools were working at stations set up throughout the concourse. From painting to conducting chemistry experiments, these demonstrations highlighted the diversity of our schools' academic offerings and the exceptional talents of our students.

After following the Archbishop Curley High School Drumline into the ballroom for dinner, we were treated to a video where we met 10-year-old Shardae Jones and her family: mom, Tiffany, and sisters, Sharnice and Shaniqua. Shardae is a student of Holy Angels Catholic School in Southwest Baltimore. As we watched the video we were able to catch a small glimpse into how much our schools mean to the children they serve, not just academically, but in ways much subtler, but no less important. Shardae comes from a single-parent family in west Baltimore. Though her mother has few resources, she struggles mightily to keep her three children enrolled in a Catholic school and is supported by the faculty and staff at Holy Angels, led by the principal Kathleen Fillipelli. The school provides the Joneses with financial assistance, clothing and food, as needed, and the love and compassion that are hallmarks of Catholic schools.

Those who witnessed “firsthand” the power of the Catholic school experience had to have been impressed by the obvious care Shardae receives at school, by the joyful yet rigorous academic environment in the school and the personal attention given to the students, many of whom undoubtedly relate to Shardae’s experiences.

This was affirmed by the second star of the night, CBS/60 Minutes correspondent and Baltimore Catholic school alumnus (St. Katharine’s and Archbishop Curley) Byron Pitts. Also raised by his mother in an impoverished area of Baltimore, Byron spoke impressively of the impact our schools had on his life – professionally and personally. He spoke of overcoming illiteracy, how our schools saved him from the institutionalization that the public schools “experts” told his mother he needed, and pleaded with those in attendance never to become indifferent to the seemingly insurmountable problems surrounding us. He recounted a story of a dinner conversation with several CBS and 60 minutes colleagues in which each named his favorite city in the world. While others spoke of Tel-Aviv and the south of France, Byron simply said, “Baltimore.” His love of the city unquestioned, he sees Catholic schools as a cure for the city’s ills and a saving grace for its children.

The \$700,000 raised Saturday will help us greatly as we continue to build on improving enrollment numbers by providing more tuition support to more families. We know that the need for financial assistance goes well beyond the city limits and that our own Catholic families in places like Overlea, Middle River and Towson, Glen Burnie, Bel Air, Hagerstown and Cumberland need help too. We will continue to host Galas, work with elected officials, and engage parishioners, alumni and others in support of our schools and the families they serve as we pursue our goal of making Catholic schools more affordable and more accessible.

I am grateful to Patrick Madden, executive director of the Department of Development, and his team for their excellent planning of Saturday night’s event and for their continuous efforts to raise funds for our schools and parishes.

On a personal note, the Gala also served as an unofficial farewell for me and I am sincerely grateful for the kind words and prayers extended to me during the video presentations and by those in attendance. Having committed so much of my energy and attention as Archbishop on strengthening the Catholic school system, it was

gratifying to be with so many individuals who contribute to the success of our Catholic schools, and to celebrate the early signs of positive growth which we pray will continue for years to come.