

St. Frances Academy welcomes Cosbys

By Kyle Taylor

Special to the Review

The Oblate Sisters of Providence, with a reputation for being strict with rules and having a low tolerance for misbehavior, showed their softer side April 20 with a gesture to a former student who's always been appreciative of their tough love.

The St. Frances Academy Community Center was dedicated that day to Dr. Camille Cosby and her husband, Dr. Bill Cosby. The "Drs. Camille and Bill Cosby Community Center" was unveiled before Camille, who was educated by the Oblate Sisters during her youth in Washington, D.C., and her famous comedian husband, in the company of Oblate Sisters, local politicians and a multitude of others from the community.

The building was blessed by Father Donald Sterling, pastor of New All Saints Church in Liberty Heights.

Camille Cosby thanked the Oblate Sisters for the impact they've had in her life and the lives of students everywhere, calling them "paradigms for all of humanity."

Bill Cosby had the audience laughing loudly as he repeatedly joked about wanting his money back from the Oblate Sisters. He was never educated by the sisters, he said, but he "heard about them."

"What I've heard is they mean business when they come riding into town because they know somebody who's up there," he said, glancing heavenward.

Camille Cosby said she never thought she'd see the day that her name would be on a building. She referred to their previous donations to the school, calling them "the best contributions my husband and I have ever made."

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In 2005, Camille Cosby donated \$2 million to help the school establish 16 full tuition scholarships. Before that, she made consecutive gifts of \$100,000 each.

Interestingly enough, the Oblate Sisters felt that they were the ones being honored.

“It’s very lovely to be able to witness this dedication,” said Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Alice Chineworth, 94, who taught Camille Cosby years ago in Washington. “She (Cosby) is a very busy person and I’m sure she has a busy calendar, so I appreciate her being here.”

Oblate Sister of Providence Helene Therese Stanislaus echoed those sentiments, saying both husband and wife displayed true genuineness by being there.

“It’s such an eventful occasion,” she said, “because it shows dedication to the poor and the down-to-earthness of the person to take the time to make it to this dedication.”

St. Frances Academy was founded 176 years ago by Mother Mary Lange of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the first religious order for black women. Located in one of the toughest sections of the city, the school stands in the shadow of the Baltimore City Detention Center and the Maryland State Penitentiary, a fact that did not go unnoticed by Camille Cosby.

“Now one of the things I absolutely hate is that there’s a prison not far from here,” she said. “And I think that this is significant that within this environment there is St. Frances Academy and the nuns have said ‘this is where our children will feel safe, they will learn, they can come here for after-school activities and whoever you are over there, you are not coming in here to penetrate us.’ “

The Oblates were not the only ones enthralled by the Cosbys’ presence. Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake presented a certificate of recognition to the couple, joking that they’re welcome to put their “names on whatever you like” in the city. Students were also giddy getting an opportunity to meet people they regularly see on television.

“It was an amazing experience,” said 12th-grader Tierra Stone, who was lucky enough to give the Cosbys a tour of the school. “It was good to show them the school and the history of Mother Lange. As a student, I felt really honored to do it because for me it’s one of those things that’ll last a lifetime.”

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To watch a photo slideshow, click on the arrow below to navigate: For audio of Camille Coby sharing her story of the Oblate Sisters of Providene and their commitment to teaching young black children, [click here](#):

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