

St. Frances to pilot boarding program

By Matt Palmer

mpalmer@CatholicReview.org

When St. Frances Academy principal Deacon Curtis Turner tells people that his school will begin to house and educate seven male students who are homeless starting in the fall, they look at him with skepticism.

“Someone said this is an insane thing to do,” Deacon Turner said. “I said, “So is teaching African-American children to read in 1828. Mother (Mary) Lange, when she started the school, didn’t make any sense. What she was doing was incredulous. We always ask what would Mother Lange do and this is something she would definitely do.”

The Baltimore City school was notified April 20 that it will receive a \$157,400 grant from the Abell Foundation to pilot the boarding program for homeless male students. The Baltimore-based organization works to help find solutions to urban poverty and has a history of working with black men. Abell picked St. Frances because of its successful track record of placing students in colleges.

The school will work with the Abell Foundation during the next few months to identify homeless young men who could join the program and attend the school.

St. Frances hopes the program can fit up to 20-25 young men in the future.

“It’s a major change in the mission of the school,” Deacon Turner said. “We have to address everything from our accreditation to getting new licensing from the state. It’s a major change in the character of the school.”

Mother Mary Lange, along with two fellow Oblate Sisters of Providence, founded the school in 1828 as the “Baltimore School for ‘Colored’ Girls.”

Deacon Turner said during Mother Lange's days, there was something called "a child of the house." The intent was to educate, feed and attend to the medical needs of the student.

"The idea is we're going to raise them all the way until they get to college," Deacon Turner said.

For much of its history, St. Frances served as a boarding school for young women, but that ended during the 1970s when St. Frances became co-educational.

"There's not one person in the building who was working here when we did it," Deacon Turner said. "We know it's part of our history."

The principal has worked in a boarding school before, but few employees have previous experience with it.

"There's a lot of anxiety around being responsible for a child 24 hours a day, 12 months out of the year," Deacon Turner said, "but a lot of that gets tempered because the Abell Foundation has given us the resources to do it properly."

The boys will be housed in the former home of the Christian Brothers, who had a mission at St. Frances. After a near year-long vacancy, the building will be turned into the boys dormitory.

In talking with the Abell Foundation, St. Frances was asked what kind of students they have not been able to help in the past.

"Some of our kids come in and the only decent meal they have is here," Deacon Turner told CatholicReview.org. "It's a kid who doesn't have breakfast, a kid who doesn't have dinner, a kid whose family is constantly moving from one place to another and have a hard time getting to school on a regular basis."

Many of those students have led faculty and staff to say that they wish they could raise the children.

"A lot of these kids we have to let go at 4 o'clock and God knows what happens to them until they get back to us at 8 o'clock," said Deacon Turner, who serves his

vocation in the Archdiocese of Washington.

The new program comes at an important time for many students of St. Frances. Families there have been hurt badly by U.S. and local economic woes.

“Some kids were able to survive poverty when the economy was good because there was hope to get out of it,” Deacon Turner said, “but frankly our population was the first to be affected by the downturn and it’s going to be the last to recover. It went from not being able to afford private school to not being able to afford housing at all for a lot of students.”

Turner continued: “We try not to let any kid slip through the cracks, but there are certain kids who have to live with us and we have to provide everything for them. Otherwise, they’ll slip through the cracks.”

Over the years, the school has temporarily housed students and families who have been homeless or without electricity.

Although the program is geared toward young men, St. Frances will consider housing young women down the road.

“We would love to be a full-fledged boarding school like we were back in the 60s and 70s,” Deacon Turner said.

The new program could alleviate many problems facing not just the students, but the St. Frances faculty and staff.

“You have this sense of helplessness,” Deacon Turner said. “Every teacher in this building knows how to teach English or mathematics. But when it comes down to providing the basic needs of the kids so they can focus on English and mathematics, that’s where most high school teachers feel helpless, and we refuse to be helpless about it.”

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