

Maryland Province, Gesu School, Sign Agreement

By Karen Witiw

On the morning of May 9, members of the Gesu School family gathered in the school's Pierre Toussaint Chapel at 17th and Thompson Streets in North Philadelphia to mark the signing of the Sustaining Agreement between Gesu School and the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus. The agreement formalizes Gesu's 100-plus-year identity as a Jesuit-sponsored elementary school, while also affirming the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary as co-stewards of the school.

Fr. Provincial Timothy Brown (MAR), Gesu School President Christine S. Beck and Gesu Board Co-Vice Chairmen Gordon Cooney and Robert McAlaine executed the Sustaining Agreement. Principal Sr. Ellen Convey, IHM, officially witnessed the signing.

Gesu's Gospel Choir, under the direction of music teacher H.L. Ratliff, welcomed guests to the celebratory signing with a lively rendition of "Dear Jesus, I Love You." Seventh grader Imani Briscoe delivered a heartfelt greeting to the community members, Jesuits, IHM sisters, trustees and faculty assembled for the ceremony.

"Today we are honored to be the first elementary school to join the ranks of the many colleges and universities, secondary schools and Nativity schools in the Maryland Province to sign a formal Sustaining Agreement with the Society of Jesus," beamed Beck in her opening remarks.

Brown shared an excerpt from the Sustaining Agreement with the assembly, stating "Although Gesu School is an 'independent Catholic school,' that is without a parish, Gesu School's board of trustees assumes responsibility to the Society of Jesus (and to the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary) to offer superior personal, spiritual and academic opportunities to the entire community, especially its students." The Maryland Province, in turn, pledged through the Sustaining Agreement to support and affirm the school in its Jesuit, Catholic mission.

Speaking on behalf of Board Chairman Winston Churchill and the entire board of trustees, McAlaine assured Brown, "We are aware of our responsibilities in this partnership and will strive to fulfill and exceed them." McAlaine explained that the board is encouraged by examples of the many Jesuit trustees, as well as Vice Principal Fr. Neil Ver'Schneider (NYK), Chaplain Fr. Ray Donaldson (MAR), Principal Sr. Ellen Convey, IHM, and Vice Principal Sr. Pat McGrenra, IHM.

Drawing a parallel to the ideal of "faith that does justice," Brown described the work at Gesu School as "hope that does justice. . . . Of the three theological virtues, hope is the most essential," he explained, referring to St. August-



Gesu Co-Vice Chairman Gordon Cooney, Gesu Principal Sr. Ellen Convey, IHM, Gesu Co-Vice Chairman Robert McAlaine, Gesu President and CEO Christine Beck, and Fr. Provincial Timothy Brown (MAR), pause for a photo after the signing of the Sustaining Agreement between Gesu School and the Maryland Province.

Photo courtesy of Gesu School

ine. "Hope has two lovely daughters, anger and courage – anger so that what should not be will not be, and courage so what should be will be."

"Justice," he continued, "is fidelity to the demands of a relationship," fidelity to the demands of the relationship that exists "between the Jesuits and the Immaculate Heart Sisters and with the trustees, administrators, faculty, staff and students of Gesu School."

Gesu School has long been recognized as a champion of justice and a "beacon of hope" for its violent, poverty-stricken North Philadelphia neighborhood, giving children a fair shot at life. Gesu accepts students from the surrounding neighborhood on a first-come first-served basis, and many of the students come from impoverished or single-adult households. Despite a four-year graduation rate of roughly 50 percent for Philadelphia's public schools, over 90 percent of Gesu's graduates complete high school on time.

Student Imani Briscoe's family has lived in the Gesu neighborhood since 1980, and her mother Bernadette Briscoe now serves on Gesu's Board of Trustees. According to the elder Briscoe, "The Sustaining Agreement between Gesu School and the Jesuits is a profound agreement that impacts not only our children but the community at large. The fact that the Jesuits have agreed to remain part of the life of the students gives continuity to the shared interest in their education," she said. "Having had three children go through Gesu and with one child currently at Gesu, I have seen the dif-

ference between Catholic and public education. In this day and age, with education being so pivotal in making career choices, I know that my children are now more capable, and can stand toe to toe with any of their peers in the job market."

"One of the first things Fr. Villiger did when he bought the property was to commit himself to the education of the local children," Fr. George Bur (MAR) explains of the Jesuit priest who first established the Jesuit mission in the area is 1868. "It's remarkable that after 140 years we're still here creating a community dedicated to Jesuit ideals and focused on the children from one of Philadelphia's neediest neighborhoods."

Bur, Gesu School's founding president and soon to be principal of St. Joe's Prep next door, knows first-hand the labor of love required to keep Gesu School's Jesuit, Catholic mission alive; in 1993, along with Principal Convey and board Chairman Churchill, oversaw Gesu's transition to an independent school when the Gesu Parish was closed due to a dwindling congregation. The school now serves 450 mostly non-Catholic children in grades pre-K through eight, and has become a model for other inner-city Catholic schools struggling to survive.

Gesu School's Sustaining Agreement with the Province has been two years in the making. The agreement required thoughtful adjustments to previous models already in place due to Gesu's unique position as the only Jesuit-sponsored elementary school in the Maryland Province, as well the school's

religiously and ethnically diverse student body. The long-awaited celebratory signing of the Agreement was followed by a luncheon in the school's Sherrerd Gymnasium.

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