

"TOGETHER WE CAN"

Brother Raymond Meagher
Director of «Family Outreach»

I'm sure that you will all agree with me that "life" is not easy these days...for anybody! For our young people, these days are particularly difficult. For many of them, a tremendous peer group pressure, rampant substance abuse, chronic low self-esteem, and a poverty of love and affection are a daily reality. The consequences of child abuse, sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, broken homes, violence, AIDS, a parent's unemployment, alcoholism and drug abuse are devastating. For many young people, the family that should be their protector, their advocate, their anchor, is itself in a state of deterioration. The alarming rise in the number of considered and attempted suicides says a great deal about the despair of youth today.

For many of our students, school is the sanest, most stable part of their lives. Many of them come to school to "hide out" from the difficulties of home and the streets. But some of them are so distracted, upset, and depressed by what is going on in their families that they cannot concentrate on their schoolwork and some act-out.

Let me give you a few examples of why some of our students may be upset, distracted, or depressed:

- Student – Mother is dying of AIDS and nobody at home is talking about it.
- Student – Mother is alcoholic/Father is drug addict/members of the extended family are drug dealers.
- Student – Father is in jail/Mother is into devil worship/student is afraid to tell anyone that she was raped.
- Student – Mother is a prostitute/never at home/rarely any food in the house/student has one set of school clothes.
- Student – Mother and Father were married and divorced three times/to different people/takes care of Father who is dying of AIDS - feeds him, pays bills, cleans apartment.

- Student – Lives in fear of father whom he loves/when drunk (which happens frequently) he is violent and abuses mother and children/at age 6 he was thrown into a toy chest by his father and landed on the edge of it/almost broke his back/hospitalized for weeks.
- Student – Afraid of being raped again by her father/keeps three locks on her bedroom door.

These are not stories from some exaggerated work of fiction. This is a small sampling of the lives of some of our students and their families here at St. Raymonds.

The quality and vitality of a Parish or a School is measured by **how well it responds to the needs of the people it serves**. In order to respond to some critical needs of our families, our Pastor, **Father Charles Kavanagh**, took a bold and significant step a few years ago. He was painfully aware of the difficulties our young people and their families were dealing with. As a former Principal, he realized the powerful impact family life has on both learning and behavior. He also realized that essential crisis-intervention and treatment services were shrinking rapidly here in New York City. So - **in collaboration with the De La Salle Christian Brothers**, Father Kavanagh started the **St. Raymonds Family Outreach**, a school-linked system of integrated services, which is accessible to all the students and families of our four schools. (This year, with the addition of Br. Timothy Murphy, we have four experienced family and youth Counselors who have a proven history of success with children, adolescents, and families.)

Having a Family Outreach Program allows us to look through a "lens" that interprets the behavior of the students in a holistic way. We can focus on the interactions among students, their families, and their environment. We can see the 'whole' child, not just the fights, the failures, the attention-seekers, or the truants. We can consider the students' behavior in the context of their families and their environment.

Our holistic "lens" presumes that **all behavior makes some sense when put in its proper context**. A students' poor conduct is usually a symptom of something else going on in his or her life. (All the detention in the world would do nothing to change the behavior **unless** something is done to address its root cause.)

(Example: Very angry student/St. Rays was his 5th high school/he was accepted as a favor - prognosis was poor/Father was a violent alcoholic who frequently beat up his wife/youngster also was beat up protecting his mother/Br. Michael worked with the family & the root cause of the trouble - major success story - had a great Senior year/graduated/norw in college/"I can't believe it, it's a miracle!" Quote from an administrator who recommended that we not accept this student. Administrator was not wearing his holistic "lens.")

If one considers a troubled student from this point of view, one no longer sees the abnormal. Whatever the behavior, it makes sense, it fits. Most times the problem that we see at school is usually a symptom of something very wrong in the family itself. The influence of the family-life of students on school performance and behavior is profound.

School and home are connected by a kind of underground emotional subway system. What is happening in one is often surfacing and playing itself out in the other. Unresolved issues in families can produce symptoms at school and unresolved issues at school can produce symptoms in families. If we are able to get a handle on or an increased understanding of these issues, then the student should hopefully function more effectively both at home and at school.

Many of our students are crying out for HELP – help for themselves and/or for their families. They are making an effort, however inappropriate in some cases, to get someone to pay attention. For some students, inappropriate behavior is the only way they know how to get the attention of people who might be able to provide the help they need.

We must also be aware of the students who do not draw attention to themselves and who do not make any trouble. There are a great number of "withdrawn" and "quiet" students who are also experiencing family and emotional problems. These are the students who do not know how to cry out or ask for help. Some of these students block out all emotions and shut out the rest of the world because they have been hurt by the significant people in their lives. They always expect to be hurt again. We must be on the "look-out" for such youngsters. (We had a tragedy a few years ago. One of our students committed suicide. He was a very quiet young man and we were not aware of his deep despair and loneliness until it was too late.)

Br. Thomas and Br. Michael have made innumerable successful interventions with students and their families these past few years. They have played a critically important role in helping many of our students to function effectively within our schools and within their homes. Some of these students were at the point of being written off because it was felt that nobody could work with them. But we don't give up easily here at St. Raymonds, we exhaust all our resources to help our young people.

The Family Outreach Staff understands the importance of **Shared Ministry**, of working closely with each

of you. We also understand the importance of communicating with you to give you some insight into what's troubling a particular student or what's happening in the home.

Rita Maloney, a teacher from Loughlin H.S., stated the following in her address to the De La Salle Christian Brothers of the Long Island/New England district a few months ago in Naragansett, Rhode Island:

(She was speaking about the "shared-ministry" that was taking place here at St. Raymonds.)

"When I was in Chicago, I met Br. Thomas Brown from St. Raymond's in the Bronx. He told me that he works as a Family Intervention Counselor there. When students are having difficulties, he gets involved with both the student and the family, doing individual as well as family counseling. Then he goes to the teachers of that student and tells them that this particular student is going through very rough times and is under a great deal of stress. How is that for shared ministry? The family is being supported, the student is being assisted, both are being taught better, more effective means of communication, the teacher has some knowledge of why the student is behaving the way he is and so the teacher's heart is called to greater compassion. Now that's pretty powerful shared ministry within the school, isn't it? It seems to me to be a very natural response to hearing the cry of the student and extending beyond to the parent as well. Br. Thomas said that if we attend effectively to the woundedness of our students that academics will fall into place."

This is what Shared Ministry is all about – **working together** as **partners** in helping our students, their families, and ourselves. Students and parents are crying out that they cannot do it alone. Teachers and administrators are saying that they cannot do it alone. The Parish priests cannot do it alone. The Family Outreach staff are not able to do it alone. **Perhaps** this is the way it is meant to be – none of us doing it alone. The African proverb "*It takes an entire village to raise a child,*" makes a lot of sense!

Together we can...

Together we can make a difference...

Together we can make a difference in the lives of our young people, their families, and ourselves.

TOGETHER WE CAN! ●