

Firms help set inner-city students on path to success



Boston attorney Thomas F. Maffei tutors Jolynne, a ninth-grader at Cristo Rey Boston.

Last year, when a Boston law firm took on a pro bono asylum case on behalf of an El Salvadoran mother fleeing an abusive man with connections to a violent street gang, it had a secret weapon.

Included in client meetings as often as possible was high school student Miguel. As a practical matter, Miguel was able to supplement translation services, helping speed the matter along when a professional interpreter was otherwise unavailable.

But perhaps more importantly, Miguel became a source of comfort and someone in whom the woman and her two young daughters could place their trust at a fraught time.

"If they needed something, they'd come to me, and I'd go to the attorney," Miguel says of the relationship.

But there were hard-to-measure contributions as well, says Elizabeth Rice, manager of litigation paralegal and support services at Sherin & Lodgen. She recalls Miguel at one point providing the girls with a welcome diversion by "calling" Santa Claus.

With Miguel's help, the case reached a favorable resolution, Rice notes.

Miguel's presence at the firm was not accidental but rather part of an ongoing relationship the firm has had with Cristo Rey Boston, a Catholic high school exclusively serving families of limited economic means from its base on Savin Hill Avenue in Dorchester.

Sherin & Lodgen is hardly alone. Cristo Rey's most recent annual report lists 15 Boston-area law firms among its corporate work-study partners, and the roster has grown since.

And while most students may be engaged in work that many would view as more mundane than what Miguel was involved in, school officials and employer hosts say it would be

a mistake to underestimate the power of welcoming in the workplace students determined to rise out of challenging circumstances into which they were born.

'A pretty good value'

In the early 2000s, what is now Cristo Rey Boston was North Cambridge Catholic High School, and it was in trouble. The Archdiocese of Boston was withdrawing its commitment to such schools, leaving them to fend for themselves to find funding to keep the lights on.

What saved North Cambridge Catholic was ultimately a Hail Mary pass thrown by one of its graduates, Thomas P. O'Neill III, former Massachusetts lieutenant governor and chief executive officer of the public relations and government affairs consulting firm O'Neill and Associates.

O'Neill's family had a long history with the school, as both his parents, former U.S. House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr. and his wife, Mildred, had attended it when it was St. John's, a parochial elementary and high school.

Perhaps there was some divine intervention, then, that O'Neill learned that the founder of the original Cristo Rey school in Chicago was scouting the Boston area as the possible site of a second school.

O'Neill met with the man and convinced him, over time, to have Cristo Rey take over an existing school rather than build one up from scratch.

But after operating in Cambridge for several years, the school was facing a daunting amount of deferred maintenance on the building it occupied. With the blessing of Cardinal Seán O'Malley, the school was able to sell off the old building and use half the

proceeds to move closer to the population from which its student body is drawn, into what had been the St. William's School in Dorchester.

After "a lot of blood, sweat and tears in the renovation of the building" from faculty and staff, Cristo Rey Boston swung open its doors in fall 2010, recalls the school's president, Michael Brennan.

There are now 32 Cristo Rey schools across the country, and the goal is to expand to 40 by decade's end, Brennan says.

The central feature to the Cristo Rey model is how the students' education is funded. From the time the students enter as freshmen, they go to school four days a week and spend the fifth day in a corporate work-study job. The employer pays a fee of \$34,800 for a team of four students. That comprises about 65 percent of the school's operating budget, according to Brennan.

The school does not have a set tuition but calculates what families pay based on a formula established by the Cristo Rey network. The average tuition is just under \$900 for the year, the target Brennan would like to set for all families to pay to attend, if enough funds can be raised.

"If you break that down, it's \$100 a month, \$25 a week, \$5 a day," he says. "I'd love to be able to say, 'For \$5 a day, you get access to some really good colleges, if you come and work hard. You get access to many of the main law firms and businesses in the city of Boston and non-profits.' That to me seems like a pretty good value."

Families will always be asked to contribute within their means, however, Brennan stresses, noting that such an investment is viewed as an integral part of the "college preparatory" process.

Cristo Rey: a case in point

With her swearing in on Nov. 23, 2015, Angela Vastey became the first Cristo Rey Boston High School graduate to become a member of the Massachusetts bar.

She hopes and expects she will not be the last.

For her work-study experience, Vastey was placed with O'Neill and Associates, the public relations and government relations firm led by Thomas P. O'Neill III, whom she notes "pretty much saved the school."

The work, she says, gave her a sense of importance as a student.

"I used to joke with my teachers that I would rather be at work than in class," she recalls. [vastey-angela](#)

She is living proof that the Cristo Rey model works.

"You might think it's an insignificant task to answer the phone," she says. "But if you think about the prestigious people calling in, and that you are the person responsible for connecting the two parties, it's makes a big impact on a student to be trusted with that responsibility."



VASTEY

Vastey also notes that being surrounded by Boston College graduates in her work-study job motivated her to apply to a college that she otherwise might have viewed as an unattainable "reach school."

The additional support from people in the office, which included helping her prepare to take the SATs and accompanying her on college tours, certainly didn't hurt, either.

Growing up in an immigrant family in which she was regularly called upon to translate and speak on behalf of her Haitian mother, Vastey says she "always wanted to represent people and be a voice."

"I saw how beneficial and powerful language is," she explains.

She now finds herself at the Law Office of Robert L. Allen in Brookline, handling zoning and corporate licensing matters.

While the office is busy, she is enjoying it.

"Zoning gets very intense," she says with a laugh. "It's a side of the law I was never introduced to."

She is now a member of Cristo Rey's board of trustees and looks forward to returning to the school for its annual Academic Signing Day to serve as a living example to students that the program works and that it opens up doors that might not otherwise have been available to them.

"I want to show them the face of someone who was in their shoes a couple of years ago," she says.

The school can almost guarantee that, if students stick with the program, doors to a four-year college will open. That has been the case for 100 percent of Cristo Rey Boston High School's graduating seniors since 2010, with more than 90 percent of the graduates going straight from high school to college.

Work that matters

While the financial support the law firms and other corporate work-study partners provide is clearly vital, the benefits of the relationship between the employers and the school extend well beyond money, according to all involved.

For students, one of the main benefits is just being able to envision that there will be a payoff for working hard in high school and college, a message they may not be able to get at home.

"A lot of [parents] are hourly wage workers who are laborers, who are very vulnerable within the economy and the changes in the economy," Brennan says. "So for the companies and the law firms to show our students that there's something on the back end of college, that there's a reason to go to college and there are people there who will help them once they get through college, is a world that they're not used to."

At Prince, Lobel, Tye, the firm's involvement with Cristo Rey is part of a larger effort, Learn And Work, or LAW, which also involves other inner-city schools, says partner Walter B. Prince.

Prince and his colleagues are happy to serve as an object lesson in the value of getting a good education. The students, he says, come to think, "If he could do it, I could do it."

And then there's the crash course students receive in so-called "soft skills," such as the importance of showing up on time, dressing properly, and looking someone in the eye.

"You don't do courses on that," Brennan says. "It's something that you acquire over time by the people you surround yourself with. The law firms — all of our partners — help us with that."

Visit Cristo Rey, and those soft skills are hard to miss, as students are quick to offer a pleasant greeting and firm handshake, and remain engaged throughout a conversation with an adult.

Students also develop a sense of pride from knowing that they are contributing to a larger effort.

One such student is Nia, who works at Proskauer Rose.

"They don't just give me busy work," she says. "They give me work that I know matters to other people around me and to myself."

The work can help shape future plans. Miguel, who recently learned he had been admitted to Howard University while waiting to hear from Bucknell, Holy Cross and Boston University, among others, says that while he may not end up practicing law — public policy and government is more his bent — he believes having hands-on experience with the asylum process will benefit him in the long run.

For the firms, joining the effort is



Dorchester attorney Lawrence J. Feeney works as a tutor with Cristo Rey Boston student Anyeli.



Thomas F. Maffei shares a high-five with Cristo Rey Boston student Jolynne, which proved to be an accurate forecast of how she would fare on her proficiency exam. She passed 'with flying colors,' Maffei reports happily.

philanthropy, to be sure. But there are other benefits as well.

Workplaces need to be able to keep students busy, but that hasn't been a problem at Sherin & Lodgen, according to Rice, who says that students have helped whittle down a backlog of "productive, non-billable work."

"There is always stuff that you say you'll get around to but you never do," she says.

As certain work environments, like hospitals, have become more computerized, lessening the need for filing paperwork, the legal community has helped fill the void, O'Neill says.

"We're finding, especially in law firms and accounting firms, a wonderful new target opportunity, places that need workers with entry-level job skills, a need that can be filled by high school students as well as anybody," he says.

The school has come to view its corporate work-study supervisors as essentially adjunct faculty members, who, by spending eight hours a week with a Cristo Rey student, will have more "face time" with that student than their English teacher.

Thomas F. Maffei's involvement with Cristo Rey began last October as a volunteer English tutor, helping students prepare for their proficiency exams. The experience has been so

rewarding that he has since expanded his role to encourage other firms to join the effort as work-study partners.

'The fruits of everyone's labor'

Perhaps the highlight of the year at Cristo Rey is Academic Signing Day, which this year will take place on May 24.

It has become an expectation that the nation's top high school athletes will announce which university they will attend with some dramatic flair. With the local media, or perhaps even ESPN gathered, the athlete will build up the suspense before donning a baseball cap from his future collegiate home.

Signing Day at Cristo Rey employs similar dramatic effects — right down to the ball caps — only the stars of the show are the school's top five academic achievers.

Sherin & Lodgen's Rice calls it her favorite event of the year, "hands down."

"The stories are so inspiring," she says. "You get to see the fruits of everyone's labor."

Charlie Klemmer, an account manager at Cristo Rey who helps manage the work-study relationships with the Boston-area law firms, says what he finds most profound is seeing each of the five students surrounded by their

entire support networks of families, fellow students, faculty and staff, but also their work-study supervisors and sponsors.

This year, there will be a bittersweet addition to Signing Day with the awarding of the first Mark P. Harty Corporate Work Study Supervisor Award, named for the late managing partner at Morrison Mahoney, a trustee at the school and corporate work-study partner since 2014.

Harty recently died after a two-and-a-half-year illness.

"On his worst days, he never forgot us," Brennan says, recalling emails from Harty right up until the end that were "almost apologetic in his illness that he couldn't do more."

Harty's colleague, Scott D. Burke, likewise believes that something special is happening at Cristo Rey and recommends members of the bar pay the school a visit and see for themselves.

What may look like a run-of-the-mill older school building from the outside transforms into a completely different, vibrant environment once you pass through the doors, Burke notes.

"To have an environment like that for these kids instills excellence," he says. "Being in that environment, you can tell the kids want to do their best."