

# SAVING CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

*A consulting program teaches business skills to Catholic schools*

**A**ccording to the National Catholic Education Association, the number of U.S. students who attend Catholic schools has fallen nearly 22 percent in the last decade.

Although the reasons for this decline vary, many Catholic schools are asking the same question, “What can we do?”

While Catholic schools are masterful in so many areas – achieving high standards of learning, keeping students engaged, maintaining a disciplined environment and instilling Christian morals – there are other areas of operating a business that are often challenging for school administrators, such as: fundraising, marketing and long-range planning.

To address these challenges, Catholic Extension has partnered with Catholic School Management, Inc. (CSM) to offer its Strategic Management and Development Program to Catholic schools in mission dioceses.

The Strategic Management and Development Program is a four-year, on-site consultation service that helps schools strengthen their Catholic identity, define goals, improve the effectiveness of school boards, enhance school image and communications, raise money, manage enrollment and market themselves more effectively.

This program promises to make a significant difference for participating schools because of CSM’s track record: It has worked with more than 3,000 schools over the years to complete its consultation program.

To date, 37 schools in five mission dioceses are participating in this initiative: Beaumont, Texas; Charleston, South Carolina; Mobile, Alabama; Richmond, Virginia; and Youngstown, Ohio.

The Diocese of Beaumont, which is entering its fourth and final year of assistance for four grade schools and one high school, has received \$36,000 per year from Catholic Extension, with a total of \$144,000. According to Marcia Stevens, superintendent of schools for Beaumont,

this program has provided schools with models of best practices and established a sense of accountability within schools. It has put them on track to become successful both financially and scholastically.

“Decisions are now based on collected data and concrete information,” she said. “The staff has an attitude of ‘How can we accomplish this?’ rather than, ‘We can’t do this.’ Positive thinking!” And, overall, enrollment is increasing in a community with a decreasing population.

Monsignor Kelly Catholic High School, one of the participating schools in Beaumont, made the decision to provide a morning and afternoon bus, which leaves from St. Catherine of Siena, a grade school also participating in the program. As a result, more than 80 percent of the 8th grade graduates are continuing their Catholic education at the high school, a significantly higher percentage than has been seen in many years. Saint Anthony Cathedral Basilica School has increased enrollment by more than 10 percent from last spring and now has a waiting list for three grade levels.

Catholic schools foster faith-filled children and are valued by parents, grandparents and guardians. We can help these schools survive. ●



Students are thriving at Catholic Schools in the Beaumont Texas school district

**JAIME TORRES**

*El Serio (the Serious) • Rogers, Arkansas*



*Meet*

**“El Serio”**

“WHEN YOU’RE IN A GANG, IT’S **SERIOUS**. YOU COULD LOSE YOUR LIFE.

**IF JESUS COMES INTO YOUR LIFE, HE’S SERIOUS, AND YOU NEED TO LISTEN.”**

**W**hen he was a teenager, Jaime Torres used his leadership skills to create a gang. Now, he is using those same abilities to lead gang members out of trouble.

In 1986, at age 14, Jaime moved to California with his parents and three brothers. His parents found work – as a janitor and seamstress – and sent the boys to school. As Jaime looked for something to cling to, he found a gang. He shaved his head, wore baggy clothes and started writing rap songs about the power of gangs. But his gang didn't bring him power – he was still a “nobody,” and it was dangerous. So, he started his own gang. People followed him, but so did trouble. Drugs. Alcohol. Crime. Threats on his life. And worse, the death of friends.

Jaime's parents drove him to Rogers, Arkansas, to start a new life. Again, Jaime was lost. He continued with gang life and drugs, and was arrested. He felt trapped. Desperate. And then came a moment of grace. He joined a youth group at a Catholic church and something clicked. He realized that “Jesus was looking for people in the streets, like gang members. Jesus was an ally.” So, Jaime begged Jesus to help him out of his situation. “Jesus didn't want people in the streets to end up in a jail or cemetery,” he said. Suddenly, Jaime imagined a new mandate – he could help Jesus find people on the streets and keep them safe and alive.

### **El Serio**

Jaime took this mandate seriously. In fact, he gave himself a nickname: El Serio (the Serious). As he explained, “When you're in a gang, it's serious. You could lose your life. If Jesus comes into your life, He's serious, and you need to listen.”

He gave up drugs and alcohol, and started writing a new kind of rap song – “Jesus en el Barrio” (Jesus in the Neighborhood). With his baldhead, sunglasses and crucifix dangling from his neck, Jaime started performing “Jesus en el Barrio” to crowds that got

bigger and bigger. To reach even more listeners, he produced a CD. People wanted to hear his song, but they also wanted to hear his story. And it turns out, they wanted help with their own problems. Jaime knew he could do something.

### **Transforming Force**

In 2003, Jaime started *Fuerza Transformadora* (Transforming Force or FT), a movement to reach out to young people who were facing the same challenges he had faced. He asked for weekly meeting space at Saint Vincent de Paul Church in Rogers. After Masses, he made announcements: “If you're struggling with your family or with drug problems, we have a group for you. Come see me.” He went to

parks where kids were milling about and brought them bulletins from Mass. He walked the streets, found addicts and talked to them. He went to high schools and gave presentations to students. The weekly meetings grew.

Jaime also brought his budding ministry to gang members in prisons. He asked the authorities for names of prisoners who had received no visitors and visited them. When one of the authorities realized that there was a warrant for Jaime's arrest for a past offense

in California, the police, who had seen the positive impact of Jaime's work, settled the issue by asking him to do 250 hours of community service working with gang members. Jaime found more people to help.

Cooperating with the police gave Jaime new ideas. Whenever he was talking to young people on the street and the police approached, the young people would scatter. So, he started planning events to bring the two sides together. He organized basketball games with police and gang members, and asked the police to bring pizza.

One time he organized a gathering that he billed as a “car show.” He had some cars to show, but the main, unadvertised attraction was a Mass and an anti-drug,

#### **“Jesus en el Barrio” (Jesus in the Neighborhood)**

At one time I lived in a  
known neighborhood

I dreamed of doing evil  
and doing it better than my friends

I always showed I had no fear...

Today I know Jesus and I now realize

That Jesus is in the neighborhood  
in search of responses

In search of your life

It doesn't matter if you're a  
gangster or a “cholo”

The day you call him,  
he will never leave you...



*Fuerza Transformadora* meets weekly in Springdale, Arkansas, to help those who are struggling.

anti-gang talk. Attendance was huge: 1,000 people. He also asked the police to come. The police were so impressed by the gathering that they helped Jaime organize a second car event.

Another time, in December, Jaime asked police to show him a “high violence” area. Once there, he knocked on a door and asked the resident if he could organize a posada. A posada, the Spanish word for “inn,” is a nine-day celebration, held between December 16-24, to remember Mary and Joseph’s search for a place to stay in Bethlehem. Posadas are common in Mexico and Guatemala. As Jaime went door to door throughout the neighborhood, he found that most people didn’t know each other. But they were happy to bring tamales or enchiladas to a posada. The first year, 20 people gathered. Now more than 100 people in that neighborhood get together yearly for posadas. And many have joined FT.

### Expanding Circles

*Fuerza Transformadora* has many programs. Typically, one starts out at a Survivor’s Retreat. “It’s not a hard sell,” Jaime said. “We just want to walk with people and tell them about alternatives.” Many attend a 20-week “Free for Life” program. For gang members and drug addicts, Jaime’s testimony and message of hope are life changing.

For instance, Fernando went to a Survivor’s Retreat after being addicted to drugs since age 15. He also had worked as a successful drug dealer. After failed attempts at rehabilitation, he met Jaime and the Survivor’s Retreat struck a chord. Fernando quit drugs and dealing and has been actively involved in FT for eight years. It has become his family and network of supporters. Now, he is a group leader, is employed and is happily married with children.

Currently, there are eight branches of FT, seven in

Arkansas and one in Texas, offering six retreats a year. Meetings are held once or twice a week at each location. At Saint Vincent de Paul church in Rogers, roughly 80 people gather for FT every Friday night at 7 p.m. for a couple of hours. To facilitate these meetings, Jaime trains leaders and provides them with booklets and guidelines for meetings.

While there is often a strong faith component to this movement – it has already yielded two religious sisters and one seminarian – FT also holds meetings outside of churches and accommodates members who may not be comfortable with its faith component.

*Fuerza Transformadora* is making a difference. Drug addicts are quitting drugs. Gang members are leaving gangs. Domestic abusers are changing their behavior. Families are becoming more cohesive. Armando and his wife, Alexandra, who met Jaime at that first posada in their neighborhood, attend weekly meetings. “Jaime taught me how to express myself, to show love and how to treat my family,” said Armando, who has been married 14 years and has three children. If things ever get tense at home, the children remind him to “Go to Fuerza.”

“When Jaime starts to talk,” said Alexandra, “you give him all your attention.” He has made their family stronger, she explained, and brought religion into their home. “He lifts our faith,” she added.

Gloria Morse, pastoral assistant at Saint Vincent de Paul since 1995, has known Jaime for years. “Jaime is a visionary,” she said. “He sees the whole picture. He knows that to help someone, you need to help families, too.” Despite his soft voice, calm nature and gentle demeanor, “He is a warrior.”

In addition to *Fuerza Transformadora*, Jaime now works with the Diocese of Little Rock. He is married and has a child. But despite his more mainstream activities, he remains in a class of his own. When he enters a room, people stop. With three CDs under his belt, he knows his audience. He knows his mission. He knows how to bring the Church into hostile territory – places of drugs, gangs, and violence – and how to find followers. He understands the importance of the Church adapting to those on the margins, so they don’t fall through the cracks.

Jaime was a finalist for the 2012 Catholic Extension Lumen Christi Award. ●



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