

Faith-based school lifts hopes for students with limited resources

Bill Lohmann | Richmond Times Dispatch

Mike Maruca, founder of the Anna Julia Cooper Episcopal School in Church Hill, posing with a group of eighth-graders.



After lunch, the students filed out of the cafeteria, heading to their first class of the afternoon, and to get there they had to walk right past the man who dreamed up this place.

Mike Maruca, a package of fiery gentleness dressed up with a dark-blue, frog-speckled tie, peppered them with praise: "Good job, girls!" and "Thank you, brother!" Even the reprimands came out kindly.

"All right, come on," he said, without raising his voice, to a dawdling student, "let's get to class."

After the hallway cleared, Maruca said, "One of the secrets to making this work is trying to overwhelm them with positive reinforcement. 'Thank you for doing that' or 'Thank you for saying thank you'."

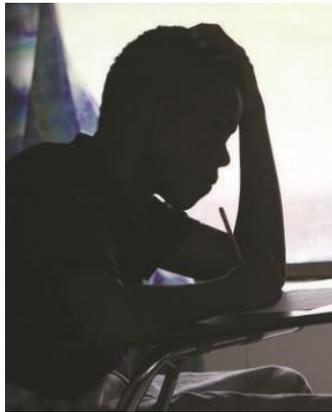
The idea being, you win the students' attention and trust, defusing the defiance and doubt, and they become more open to math, science and reading, as well as the other life lessons being taught. It's very simple, but then again, it's not simple at all.

This is Anna Julia Cooper Episcopal School, a small, independent, tuition-free, faith-based middle school for students of limited resources located on 29th Street in Richmond's East End. Many of the school's 62 students live in public-housing communities where murders are not uncommon, family dynamics are often complicated and positive ambitions are difficult to conceive and even harder to reach. It is difficult for anyone who doesn't live in places like those to imagine the challenges that confront these children on a daily basis.

Which is where this school comes in, operating with the advantage of small classes, long school days and summer sessions and a team of teachers, staff and volunteers for whom this work is personal. The stated mission is to help students "set their sights on college and responsible citizenship."

The school graduated its first class of eighth-graders last spring, launched its fourth year this month and has come a long way since September 2009. That's when, with the help of Peter Paul Development Center, it welcomed its first 25 students to a converted house where, in those early days Maruca, its founder, served breakfast every morning.

Last year, the school moved into its current building, a former public preschool across the street from Creighton Court, one of the city's public-housing developments. Decades ago, the property was the site of a nightclub called the Pink Garter.



The school is on a nice roll — new home, rising enrollment, high retention, wonderful outside support and its first graduates, many of whom received scholarships to some of the area's most prestigious private schools. But Maruca is not yet ready to say it is a success, and, in fact, goes out of his way to insist it isn't. Not yet.

"I'm always worried about it being portrayed almost too hopefully," he said. "There's a lot of evidence that something remarkable has happened here, and I hope it continues, but we're still young. Our mission is a very ambitious one — to have all of these kids not only

thinking about college but *going* to college. And even deeper than that, for them to get a kind of stability and traction and to have some hope ... (so) they have a good shot at a more decent life.

"But I always want people to know the degree of difficulty. There is no magic. It takes a tremendous amount of work."

Maruca, 55, used a baseball analogy — he loves baseball, having grown up in Princeton, N.J., dreaming of playing center field for the New York Yankees — and said the strides the school has made in its first three years have merely loaded the bases. Now, he said, it must hit a grand slam.

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More than two decades ago, Maruca was the founding director of the Sacred Heart Center in South Richmond, which took over the abandoned Sacred Heart School and started a child care center, after-school program and job-training center for the unemployed. The center became a beacon in a community in need of hope.

He left Richmond and the priesthood, worked as a counselor and eventually returned here, taking a job as head of the middle school at Steward School. He loved his time at Steward, but he started to think about working again in a community facing enormous challenges, as he had at Sacred Heart. He received nothing but encouragement from his wife, Jeanine Harper, executive director of Greater Richmond SCAN (Stop Child Abuse Now).

"One of the most significant things in our marriage is this shared sense of mission and work," Harper said. "I've always been in his corner because I can't think of anybody ... who has his energy and kindness and intellect to pull something off. He's very good at dealing with hard things."

The school, whose namesake was a groundbreaking African-American educator and activist, was born in a meeting room at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Richmond's West End, where Maruca met others who shared the same vision and offered resources that could make it happen.

The money and start-up support came from individuals, foundations and churches; daily prayer and a weekly chapel service are part of the life of the school, which is affiliated with the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia.

Hands-on help has come from everywhere: volunteers who work one-on-one with students, mentors like Mary Cay Kollmansperger who guide students and befriend entire families, and groups who descend on the place to paint and construct shelves or set up new lockers for the school's fledgling football team, which begins play this fall.



Students from Steward came and painted logos of Virginia colleges and universities that hang on the cafeteria walls so higher education remains on the minds of the students even while they eat.

"We have lots of people cheering us on," said Maruca.

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Supporters include Gussie Bannard, who retired in 2007 as head of St. Catherine's School and had been casting about "for something that I really believed in." She found it at Anna Julia Cooper, where she is a regular volunteer.

"I just was captured by (Maruca's) vision, completely," she said. "He just collected volunteers from all these different parts of his life to come in and work with these kids, who one minute would just be hungry for what you had to give them and then the next minute would be exploding because of what happened to them the night before. He taught us to hang in there and be present and listen."

As to Maruca's personal motivation, it all comes from this:

"I'm one of the lucky ones," he said. "I grew up ... and had a house and a safe place to play and a decent school and good parents. I think I have a natural desire to want to help others who didn't get all that."

As he walked the halls of the school, Maruca chatted with a slight sixth-grader who said his shorts for physical education class were too big, and with another whose jeans didn't meet the school's dress code: khaki or blue pants, solid-color shirt with a collar. On occasional dress-down days, students can wear what they want — within reason — as long as they bring \$1 or a can of food to donate to a food bank.

"They're usually on the receiving end," Maruca said of the charitable donations. "It's good for them to give back."



As head of school, Maruca pays frequent visits to the homes of students, including in the summer, and especially when they don't show up for school. After the bell rings in the morning, Maruca determines who's not present and then goes to find them and bring them to school. However, he insists the best work is done by others.

"I feel like I'm just keeping the door open and some really incredible people are walking in," he said. "There is just no substitute for getting the right people."

People such as George Bland Jr., who joined the school this year as principal and football coach. Bland, who taught at Steward with Maruca, had long dreamed of working at a place like this. Besides a heart for the task, Bland brought Anna, a rescued black lab who has become the school dog, sweetly roaming the halls, playing fetch and offering unconditional love to the kids.

Maruca said the school fills its enrollment with an academic cross-section of students, intentionally not "skimming" the highest-achieving students from public schools, but seeking those who seem a good fit. Parents must sign a covenant, agreeing to support their children and the school. Students pay no tuition, but families are responsible for a \$50 enrollment fee.



Enrollment has grown primarily through word of mouth, and by Maruca and other staff members knocking on doors. Attrition is low, but Maruca has had to dismiss a few students for chronic

misbehavior after many chances. There is a growing waiting list, and families with one child at the school tend to send younger siblings.

Danielle Bugg and Olindo Webber have a sixth-grader and an eighth-grader at the school, and their ninth-grader, Daimonte, graduated in June. They are thrilled with the progress their children have made academically, which coincided with their moving from the Mosby Court public housing complex to a home in Highland Park.

"A blessing," Bugg said of the school. "Once they started going to that school, everything changed."

The children's grades have improved, as has their interest in school. They read more, and their experiences at the school have helped them mature. She cited the dedication of the teachers and the kind but no-nonsense approach established by Maruca.

"They can get over on me when they want to," said Bugg, "but they can't get over on Mr. Maruca."

Such anecdotes warm Maruca, but he's uneasy reading too much into them or making some broad pronouncement of triumph when the first graduates have barely started ninth grade.

"On the one hand, we're trying to create an environment which is different and that you can feel when you come in the building," he said. "That sense of community where kids really do want to be here.

"We're also letting them know ... they've got to be polite and they've got to learn all of those basic things that any of us need to make our way in the world and to have certain choices and opportunities. But they've got to do their homework. The English and math have to get better, or this is just a nice feel-good story that ... wouldn't be making the difference that I believe it is. On the days when it really clicks and you see the changes in the kids, I almost feel sorry for those who aren't here to see it."

